

THE SHAKESPEARE PLAYS

Being The Remarkable True Comedy, History
and Tragedy of Shakespeare

A Play by Martin Keady

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NOTE ON CASTING (OR DOUBLING PLAN)

THE SHAKESPEARE PLAYS is an epic play, taking place over 25 years and with multiple characters, but it has been written for just six actors: five male; and one female. Consequently, there will be multi-rolling, as follows.

FIRST ACTOR: to play John Hemings (32 at the start). AND First Soldier who arrests Essex; and Court Official.

SECOND ACTOR: to play Henry Condell (22 at the start). AND Lord (who carries coffin, in both the performance at The Globe and at Court); Sheriff of London; and Senior Priest/Judge.

THIRD ACTOR: solely to play William Shakespeare (34 at the start).

FOURTH ACTOR: to play Richard Burbage (31 at the start). AND Lord (who carries coffin at The Globe); the Earl of Essex; the Lord Chief Justice; Collins, Shakespeare's lawyer; Richard Quiney, Shakespeare's old friend and Thomas Quiney's father; Pallbearer; and Ben Jonson.

FIFTH ACTOR: to play multiple small roles: Actor dressed as a Lord; Allen, the Landlord; Peter Street, Theatrical Carpenter; Augustine Philips, Actor; the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron; Bryant, An Actor; Army Captain; The Queen - Elizabeth I; Masked Man (aka Hangman); Thomas Quiney, Shakespeare's son-in-law; Anne, Shakespeare's wife; Michael Drayton; Bookseller; and Printer.

ACTRESS: to play several small roles: actor playing a Shepherd; Lord (who carries coffin in the performance at court); Second Soldier who arrests Essex; Judith Shakespeare, William's daughter; Waitress; and Pallbearer.

NOTES ON STAGING

The start of each Act and the accompanying date (e.g. "Act One (Comedy): 1598") should ideally be announced, signalled or communicated to the audience in some way.

In Act One, a horse is required on stage to pull a cart. This "horse" can be represented in any way possible: purely imaginatively; by puppets; or even by a "pantomime horse", with two actors inside, front and back. Whatever works!

And in Act Two, the action at The Globe theatre switches between the wings and the stage. Throughout this action, the wings and the stage will be lit alternately, to indicate where the action is taking place, or any other suitable means of highlighting the wings and the stage alternately can be used.

ACT ONE (COMEDY) : 1598

SCENE ONE (THE DRESSING ROOM IN A THEATRE)

APPLAUSE is heard off-stage as JOHN HEMINGS and HENRY CONDELL, who are both wearing helmets having just played "Soldiers" on stage, wait in the dressing-room for the OTHER ACTORS to come off-stage: HEMINGS to collect their costumes; CONDELL while counting takings and noting them in a ledger. Behind them, on the other side of the stage, is a table with several wine bottles on top of it.

HEMINGS:

Good old Will! He's done it again!

CONDELL:

He always does. Rare is the Shakespeare failure! In fact, in all the years we've been together, I can't think of one.

An ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD enters.

HEMINGS:

Costume, please.

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

Oh, come on, Mister Hemings. *(Indicating the table and the wine bottles.)* Can't I have a drink first?

HEMINGS:

No.

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

Why not?

HEMINGS:

Because like every *other* actor I've ever met, you'll have one drink, then another and then, before you know it, you'll be mewling and puking like an infant, and my beautiful robes will be ruined. So, costume off, please.

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

Very well.

He starts removing his costume.

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

How are the takings, Mister Condell?

CONDELL:

Excellent! Audiences obviously adore Falstaff.

HEMINGS:

Just as they *loved* Romeo and Juliet, *loathed* Shylock and laughed their heads off at *Bottom*!

RICHARD BURBAGE, who has been playing FALSTAFF, enters and removes the cushion from under his tunic that has served as his "stomach". He is accompanied by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 34, bearded and with an ear-ring in his left ear. BURBAGE and SHAKESPEARE are laughing and congratulating each other. While they are doing so, the ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD removes his costume and exits.

BURBAGE:

Well done, Will - another triumph!

SHAKESPEARE:

Well done yourself, Richard. You are Falstaff! No-one else can ever play him!

BURBAGE:

I'm not sure whether that's an insult or a compliment.

SHAKESPEARE:

BOTH!

EVERYONE, including BURBAGE himself, laughs.

BURBAGE:

Now, where are the refreshments? I need a drink.

He goes over to the table, picks up a bottle and pulls the cork out with his teeth. He spits the cork aside and swigs. HEMINGS, CONDELL and SHAKESPEARE all watch as it looks as if he will drink the whole bottle in one, so they do not notice an OLD MAN dressed all in black (including a black puritanical skull-cap) enter behind them.

BURBAGE:

Aah! That's better.

OLD MAN:

Is that wine?

ALL THE ACTORS immediately turn round to look at THE OLD MAN.

BURBAGE:

Allen! What are you doing here? You're not allowed backstage.

ALLEN:

It's my land that you're standing on, Burbage, and I can go wherever I want on my property. Now, I asked you a question: is that wine?

BURBAGE:

So what if it is? Aren't we entitled to a drink after a performance?

ALLEN:

No, you're not! I've told you before - all of you - that drinking alcohol is forbidden on these premises.

BURBAGE:

Damn you Puritans! You're always spoiling other people's fun. Can't we even enjoy the first performance of a new play?

ALLEN:

"First performance"? Oh, no - it's your last performance! Or at least one of them.

BURBAGE:

What does that mean?

ALLEN:

It means that I am terminating your tenancy with *immediate* effect.

BURBAGE:

What? You can't do that!

ALLEN:

I can, and I am.

BURBAGE:

Why?

ALLEN:

For your continually flouting the terms of the lease by drinking on the premises, and for staging plays that celebrate drunks and sinners, like that fat oaf, Falstaff! That's why I'm giving you one month's notice to quit.

BURBAGE:

A month? But that's barely enough time to remove the seats and the stage.

ALLEN:

Oh, you don't have to worry about removing them: I'll be keeping them.

BURBAGE:

What?! You can't do that! The lease says we have permission "to take down any buildings that we might erect".

ALLEN:

Oh, does it?

BURBAGE:

Yes, it does!

ALLEN:

Well, we can discuss the matter further in court - *if* you can afford a lawyer and a long, drawn-out court case!

He laughs and goes to leave, before stopping in the doorway.

ALLEN:

Goodnight - *(Pause.)* I was about to say "Gentlemen", but of course you're not "Gentlemen", are you? No "player" could ever be a gentleman.

He exits, laughing. BURBAGE waits for a moment, then goes to follow him.

BURBAGE:

We ought to run him through!

HEMINGS steps in front of BURBAGE to stop him following ALLEN.

HEMINGS:

No, Richard. That way we'll end up in court contesting a *murder* charge rather than the terms of a lease.

BURBAGE:

No court would convict us!

HEMINGS:

Why? Because society has such a high opinion of players? *(He looks at BURBAGE questioningly, then slowly shakes his head.)* Of course not. They use us for their "entertainment" and then, when they've had it, they get rid of us. 'Twas ever thus - 'twill be ever thus.

BURBAGE, SHAKESPEARE and CONDELL all look desolate.

SCENE TWO (A TAVERN)

HEMINGS, CONDELL, BURBAGE and SHAKESPEARE sit at a table in a tavern, sipping ale from tankards: HEMINGS looks off-stage.

HEMINGS:

It's starting to snow.

BURBAGE (proclaiming, as he is prone to):

Can we stop talking about the blasted *weather* and concentrate on the matter in hand?

HEMINGS:

Alright. There's no need to shout. You're not on stage!

BURBAGE eyes him, angrily.

SHAKESPEARE:

Stop bickering, you two. *(Pause.)* What are we going to do?

BURBAGE:

What we always do.

SHAKESPEARE:

Which is?

BURBAGE:

Move, of course. That's why we're called *travelling* players.

SHAKESPEARE:

But where to?

HEMINGS:

I have an idea.

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, John?

HEMINGS:

I have a neighbour who recently inherited a plot of land on Bankside.

SHAKESPEARE:

Bankside?

HEMINGS:

Yes - right beside the river. I'm sure we could lease it from him. It's perfect! There's lots of space and he'll charge us less rent than Allen does. To be honest, I was going to suggest we move there before Allen evicted us: now we have no choice.

BURBAGE:

But *The Rose* is on Bankside: we'd be cutting our throats if we moved next door.

HEMINGS:

Not necessarily. Bankside is big enough for two theatres, especially if one of them is showing *Shakespeare's* plays.

SHAKESPEARE:

You're too kind, John.

HEMINGS:

I'm not being "kind": it's a fact! No-one draws an audience like you, Will, and Bankside is where all the audiences are.

CONDELL:

Exactly. Because it's where all the bear-pits and brothels are.

The others laugh.

BURBAGE (to HEMINGS):

Would your neighbour really lease the land to us?

HEMINGS:

I'm sure he would. He's retiring to the country, so he has no use for it himself.

BURBAGE:

And what kind of lease are we talking about?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes. How long?

HEMINGS:

Oh, about thirty years.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Thirty years"?

HEMINGS:

At least! We could stake our whole future there. And the best part is that the south bank of the river is outside the city walls, so it's outside the jurisdiction of the City of London. Once we're there, Allen won't be able to touch us!

BURBAGE:

There's a problem.

HEMINGS:

What's that?

BURBAGE:

We have no stage, or seats! Allen won't let us take them, even though legally they're ours.

For a moment, there is silence around the table.

HEMINGS:

It's really starting to snow now.

BURBAGE:

Damn you, John! This is no time to prattle about the weather.

HEMINGS:

Hang on!

SHAKESPEARE:

What, John?

HEMINGS:

I've had another idea.

The OTHERS all look at him questioningly.

SCENE THREE (THE STREET OUTSIDE THE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE stand outside the theatre, jumping up and down, and rubbing their hands together, to try to keep warm.

BURBAGE:

Where are they? I'm freezing!

SHAKESPEARE:

Don't worry about John and Henry: they're the most trustworthy men I know. They'll be here shortly.

HEMINGS (calling out, from off-stage):

HELLO!

HEMINGS and CONDELL enter with an OLD MAN, all three of them wearing fur coats and fur hats.

HEMINGS:

William, Richard, this is the man I told you about, Mr Peter Street, the finest theatrical carpenter in London - the man who built The Rose.

STREET:

Pleased to meet you, Gentlemen, especially you, Mister Shakespeare: I've heard an awful lot about you.

SHAKESPEARE:

None of it good, I trust.

STREET:

Very little, as befits a player.

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

BURBAGE:

Mister Street, I must ask you something.

STREET:

Go ahead.

BURBAGE:

I know you've built many theatres, including The Rose, but have you ever taken one down?

STREET:

No, but it's the same process - just in reverse.

THE OTHERS all laugh, including BURBAGE.

BURBAGE:

I suppose it is.

SHAKESPEARE:

I don't doubt, Mr Street, that you can take the theatre apart, but can you do it quickly? We only have a few days while Allen is away for Christmas, visiting his relatives.

STREET:

A Puritan Christmas? That'll be merry!

SHAKESPEARE and THE OTHERS all laugh.

STREET:

I can do it - and quickly!

He looks behind him at the theatre.

STREET:

Take me inside and I'll calculate how many men I'll need.

HEMINGS:

However many you need, we'll pay for them.

They all turn and go inside the theatre, exiting.

SCENE FOUR (THE STREET OUTSIDE THE THEATRE)

The sound of banging, hammering and sawing is heard off-stage. It continues for a moment, then CONDELL and SHAKESPEARE enter: when they speak, they have to shout to make themselves heard.

SHAKESPEARE:

Street's men are certainly working fast.

CONDELL:

They ought to be: we're paying them *double* their usual rate.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Double"?

CONDELL:

Well, it is Christmas.

SHAKESPEARE groans.

HEMINGS enters, sitting on a cart, full of timber, that is being pulled by a horse.

HEMINGS:

The first load's ready, Will. We ought to get going.

SHAKESPEARE:

Right.

SHAKESPEARE climbs up alongside HEMINGS.

CONDELL (calling up to them):

Godspeed!

The horse starts walking slowly down the street - very slowly.

SHAKESPEARE (to HEMINGS):

We're hardly making any speed, let alone "Godspeed"!

HEMINGS looks round at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

Stop complaining and enjoy the ride.

SHAKESPEARE looks even more miserable. HEMINGS whips the horse forward and it moves forward, slowly - perhaps even more slowly than before - until finally it exits. CONDELL watches them go, then shakes his head (in amusement or disbelief) and also exits.

SCENE FIVE (THE RIVERBANK)

The horse and cart, with HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE still sitting on it, re-enter, moving as slowly as before, if not more so. SHAKESPEARE tries to huddle up to HEMINGS (and his fur coat) for warmth, but suddenly HEMINGS sits up and pulls hard on the reins.

HEMINGS:

WHOAH!

SHAKESPEARE also sits up with a start as the horse stops.

HEMINGS points directly in front of him - out into the audience.

HEMINGS:

There it is.

SHAKESPEARE looks directly ahead, at what he is pointing at.

SHAKESPEARE:

My God! You were right, John. The whole river's *frozen over!*

HEMINGS:

It's our very own bridge across the Thames, direct to Bankside!

He smiles, triumphantly, while SHAKESPEARE continues to take in the extraordinary scene in front of him.

SHAKESPEARE:

There are so many people on the ice.

Suddenly, he looks from side to side, as he obviously follows someone - or more than one person - moving in front of him.

SHAKESPEARE:

They're walking...or sledging...or skating!

He looks back round at HEMINGS.

SHAKESPEARE:

Are you sure the ice can take our weight?

HEMINGS:

Of course it can. As you can see, there are hundreds of people on it already.

SHAKESPEARE:

"People", yes. *(He looks back round at the contents of the cart.)*
But not *horses* - and certainly not horses pulling carts laden with *timber!*

He looks away, looking further along the river.

SHAKESPEARE:

Why don't we just use the *real* bridge - London Bridge?

HEMINGS sighs.

HEMINGS:

I've already told you: it's too far away and too crowded, even at night, with all the shops and houses on it, let alone the traffic, because it's the *only* bridge across the river. *(Pause.)* It would take an age just to get a single cartload across it, let alone the whole theatre. *(Pause.)* We'd never get everything out of the theatre and across it before Allen comes back from his holiday.

Once again, he looks directly in front of him - at the ice.

HEMINGS:

This is the only way.

SHAKESPEARE also looks ahead at the ice - nervously.

SHAKESPEARE:

Alright. Proceed.

HEMINGS snaps the reins and slowly the horse moves forward a few feet, before stopping, obviously right at the edge of the ice.

HEMINGS (calling out):

GO ON!

The horse puts one foot forward into the air. Then it carefully puts that foot down on the ice. Then it walks forward and puts down another foot, then another, until finally all four of its feet are on the ice. Finally, it walks forward, pulling the cart out onto the ice. As it does so, SHAKESPEARE leans out of the cart and looks down at the ice.

SHAKESPEARE:

It's holding! It's taking our weight!

HEMINGS:

What did I tell you? *(Pause.)* Like the Good Lord himself, we're walking on water!

SHAKESPEARE laughs, sits up and again looks around him in amazement, taking in all the other people already on the ice.

SHAKESPEARE:

My God! There are even food stalls.

HEMINGS:

Of course there are: all these people sledging and skating need feeding, too.

Suddenly SHAKESPEARE sits bolt upright, having obviously seen something very surprising.

SHAKESPEARE:

Stay away from the stalls selling hot food!

HEMINGS:

Don't worry: I will!

Suddenly, HEMINGS takes the reins in one hand and points with the other.

HEMINGS:

There's the Rose!

Then he looks further along the opposite riverbank, until he sees what he has obviously been looking for and points again.

HEMINGS:

And there's our new home.

SHAKESPEARE looks at what he is pointing - the site for the new theatre - then looks back at HEMINGS and smiles, broadly. HEMINGS smiles back at him, equally broadly. Then HEMINGS snaps the reins to move the horse forward again.

HEMINGS:

GO ON!

The horse, cart, HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE move further forward - out onto the ice - until finally they exit.

SCENE SIX (THE OPPOSITE RIVERBANK: THE SITE OF THE NEW THEATRE)

Slowly, the horse, cart, HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE re-enter: they reach the middle of the stage, then HEMINGS snaps the reins.

HEMINGS:

WHOAH!

The horse stops immediately. HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE jump down from the cart and look all around them: indeed, they both complete a full 360 degrees rotation, taking everything in.

HEMINGS:

So here we are - our new home.

SHAKESPEARE looks unimpressed.

HEMINGS:

I know it's not much now, but one day it will be the finest theatre in London - nay, the world!

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

HEMINGS:

Most importantly, it will be *our* theatre. We won't have to answer to Allen or anyone else.

SHAKESPEARE:

Except the censor.

HEMINGS:

Well, we always have to answer to the censor.

SHAKESPEARE:

How long will it take to build the new theatre?

HEMINGS:

Oh, about six months.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Six months"?

HEMINGS:

At most.

SHAKESPEARE:

Why so long? It only took a few days to take the old one down.

HEMINGS:

Because it will be bigger, better and grander than any theatre ever built - as befits *Shakespeare's* theatre.

SHAKESPEARE:

But what will we do for six months? We'll starve!

HEMINGS:

It's alright, Will. I've already negotiated a temporary lease with The Curtain while construction of our theatre is going on. Everything is arranged. All you have to do is *write*. So, more masterpieces, please!

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

SHAKESPEARE:

You've obviously thought of everything.

HEMINGS:

I try to. In fact, as company manager, it's my job to!

SHAKESPEARE:

I have only one remaining wish.

HEMINGS:

Oh, yes? And what's that?

SHAKESPEARE:

I wish I could see old Allen's face when he returns from his Christmas holiday.

HEMINGS:

That would be worth seeing!

They both laugh.

SCENE SEVEN (THE STREET OUTSIDE THE THEATRE)

A smiling ALLEN enters an empty stage, walking towards his theatre, or so he thinks. Suddenly he stops smiling and stops walking. He looks around: he screws up his eyes and opens them again. Then he literally does a double-take. He looks behind him, as if he has somehow walked past the theatre. Finally, he kneels down, squints at the ground and picks up a single nail. He stands up again and holds it aloft.

ALLEN (screaming):

CONSTABLE!!!!

The lights come down instantly.

ACT TWO (HISTORY) : 1601

SCENE ONE (BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE are all in the backstage office of the new Globe theatre: SHAKESPEARE sits at the desk, quill in hand, writing; HEMINGS is checking costumes; CONDELL is also sitting at the desk, counting money; and BURBAGE is pacing up and down, obviously trying to remember his lines.

BURBAGE:

"Sans teeth...sans eyes...sans..."

He hesitates, obviously trying to remember the next word.

HEMINGS (without looking round):

"Everything."

BURBAGE (remembering):

"Everything"! That's it. Damn it!

He resumes his pacing in silence, or at least he mutters so quietly that it is inaudible.

A SHEPHERD (or more precisely an Actor playing a Shepherd, complete with Shepherd's Crook) enters.

SHEPHERD:

Master Shakespeare, Sir?

SHAKESPEARE (without looking up):

Yes...?

SHEPHERD:

There's someone to see you, Sir. Someone important.

SHAKESPEARE:

Who is it?

SHEPHERD:

A nobleman, Sir.

SHAKESPEARE finally looks up at him.

SHAKESPEARE (smiling):

A nobleman in a *playhouse*? Are you sure he doesn't want the *bawdy house* next door?

SHAKESPEARE keeps smiling, but the SHEPHERD just looks confused.

SHEPHERD:

No, Sir. He says he wants to see you.

SHAKESPEARE:

And which particular "nobleman" is dignifying us with his presence?

SHEPHERD:

The Earl of Southampton, Sir.

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE all stop what they are doing and stare at the SHEPHERD for a moment. Then -

HEMINGS (to SHAKESPEARE):

Your so-called "patron"? What does he want?

SHAKESPEARE:

I don't know, but I shall have to find out. *(To the SHEPHERD.)*
Tell him I'm coming.

SHEPHERD:

Yes, Sir. He's waiting on the stage.

SHAKESPEARE:

"The stage"?

SHEPHERD:

Yes, Sir. He said he wanted to take in the view from it.

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE all stare at the SHEPHERD for a moment, looking confused, before he exits.

HEMINGS (to SHAKESPEARE):

D'you want us to come with you?

SHAKESPEARE:

No. I'd better see him on my own. He always preferred to conduct business on a one-to-one basis.

HEMINGS:

Well, be careful. You know what he's like. *(Pause.)* He'll demand the world!

SHAKESPEARE sighs heavily.

SHAKESPEARE:

And I shall have to provide it.

Slowly, he gets up from his desk and exits.

SCENE TWO: THE STAGE, THE GLOBE THEATRE

SHAKESPEARE walks out onto The Globe's stage and sees SOUTHAMPTON standing at the front of the stage, looking out: he is handsome, exquisitely dressed and aged about 30, with black curly hair and a neatly trimmed moustache and beard.

SOUTHAMPTON (noticing Shakespeare):

I always wanted to be a player.

SHAKESPEARE joins him at the front of the stage.

SHAKESPEARE:

That's funny - I always wanted to be a *Gentleman*.

SOUTHAMPTON laughs.

SOUTHAMPTON:

It's a pleasure to see you again, Will.

SHAKESPEARE:

And it's an *honour* to see you again, my Lord.

SHAKESPEARE bows and SOUTHAMPTON looks pleased by this show of obeisance, before looking out from the stage again.

SOUTHAMPTON:

The Globe is a *magnificent* theatre, Will. It's much bigger - and *grander* - than the one you had in Shoreditch.

He looks back at SHAKESPEARE.

SOUTHAMPTON:

You're obviously doing very well for yourself.

SHAKESPEARE:

I survive, my Lord, which is all one can aspire to in these *mean* times.

SOUTHAMPTON:

They are "mean" indeed, with the war continuing in Ireland and the threat of war in England.

SHAKESPEARE looks puzzled.

SHAKESPEARE:

There is no threat of war here, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON looks at him in surprise.

SOUTHAMPTON:

With an ageing Queen and no heir, what else can there be *but* the threat of war?

SOUTHAMPTON laughs, but SHAKESPEARE just looks nervous.

SHAKESPEARE:

I heard that you yourself were in Ireland, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON (nodding):

That's right. I was there for three years, serving under the Earl of Essex - "the General of our Gracious Empress", as you so memorably christened him in "*Henry the Fifth*".

SHAKESPEARE suddenly looks embarrassed.

SHAKESPEARE:

Unfortunately, my Lord, as he is no longer her "General", I had to cut that line.

SOUTHAMPTON looks upset, even offended, before smiling again.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Yes, Essex is being excised in all kinds of ways, which is why I wanted to see you, Will.

SHAKESPEARE:

Me, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Yes, you Will. (*He smiles at SHAKESPEARE broadly.*) I want to commission a special production in honour of my noble Lord Essex.

Now SHAKESPEARE looks very nervous.

SHAKESPEARE:

Of which play, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON looks shocked.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Why, "Richard the Second", of course? What other play is as relevant to our troubled time?

SHAKESPEARE looks appalled.

SHAKESPEARE:

Perhaps that is why it has been *banned*, my Lord - or at least a certain part of it.

SOUTHAMPTON:

You mean the deposition scene, where Richard hands over his crown?

SHAKESPEARE (nodding):

I do. (*He smiles, thinly.*) The Queen and her advisers, especially Lord Cecil, do not want any depiction of a sovereign *surrendering* their crown, not with all the uncertainty surrounding the succession.

SOUTHAMPTON (angrily):

I don't care! I want to commission a production of "*Richard the Second*", *complete* with deposition scene, for a week today.

SHAKESPEARE looks at him in amazement.

SHAKESPEARE:

That's impossible, my lord. As I just said, that play, at least in its current form, has been banned by order of the Queen.

SOUTHAMPTON:

I don't care! That's the play I want to see and that's the play you will perform.

SHAKESPEARE takes a deep breath.

SHAKESPEARE:

May I ask why you want to see that play in particular, my Lord? There are many other plays that we could perform in honour of the Earl of Essex.

SOUTHAMPTON (angrily):

No! It must be "*Richard*".

He looks imploringly at SHAKESPEARE.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Don't you see, Will? It's about Essex!

SHAKESPEARE looks confused.

SHAKESPEARE:

Is it, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Of course it is! It's the story of a vengeful, despotic ruler who is corrupted by their advisers and consequently robs the nobles of their titles, just as the Queen has been corrupted by Lord Cecil and robbed the Earl of Essex of his title of vice-regent. (*He sighs, heavily.*) That is why we want to honour the Earl. By staging *Richard* in front of an audience of veterans -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting, nervously):

"Veterans", my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Yes, of the Irish war. By staging it in front of an audience of veterans who served under Essex, along with other followers of the Earl, we will stir them all to petition the Queen.

SHAKESPEARE (fearfully):

To do what?

SOUTHAMPTON:

To release him from house arrest, restore his title of vice-regent and reinstate him as heir to the throne.

SHAKESPEARE looks amazed.

SHAKESPEARE:

I fear you overestimate the importance of the theatre, my Lord: it can only represent, or recreate, history, not alter it.

SOUTHAMPTON (firmly):

I want you to do this, Will. In fact, I *need* you to do it.

SHAKESPEARE (looking pained):

I am not sure I can, my Lord. I am eager to help you, *and* my Lord Essex, but if I stage "*Richard the Second*", complete with deposition scene, I may find myself stretched out upon the *rack*.

SOUTHAMPTON:

And if you do *not* stage it, you may find yourself stretched out in the *gutter*.

SHAKESPEARE looks stunned.

SHAKESPEARE:

My Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Do you forget the debt you owe me, Will?

SHAKESPEARE looks embarrassed, even ashamed.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, my Lord. *(Pause.)* I could never forget.

SOUTHAMPTON:

I am glad to hear it. After all, it is *quite* a debt.

SHAKESPEARE:

I know, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Seven years ago, when you were struggling to make a living in plague-ridden playhouses, *I* gave you shelter. *I* gave you a commission then, to write your "Sonnets" -

SHAKESPEARE *(interrupting)*:

It was your *family* who commissioned the "Sonnets", my Lord, in *your* honour.

SOUTHAMPTON *(angrily)*:

Don't quibble, Will! Even if my family paid for the "Sonnets", I myself gave you the money to help you build your theatre.

He looks around The Globe again, then back at SHAKESPEARE.

SOUTHAMPTON:

The Globe is a fine theatre, Will - the finest in England - and *I* paid for it.

SHAKESPEARE:

Only in part, Sir. I earned the rest and the other players invested money too.

SOUTHAMPTON (angrily):

In *full*, Will! (*Pause.*) If I hadn't helped you when you were at your lowest ebb - if I hadn't been your *patron!* - you'd be back in Stratford on Avon now, making *gloves* for a living!

SHAKESPEARE looks humbled, even humiliated.

SOUTHAMPTON (lowering his voice):

The money I gave you, Will, was a gift - a *favour* - and now I simply want you to repay the favour.

SHAKESPEARE looks frightened.

SHAKESPEARE:

And if I do not, or cannot?

For a moment, SOUTHAMPTON looks surprised.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Then I will have to demand repayment of the money I have given you over the years, in full and with interest - immediately.

SHAKESPEARE looks mortified.

SHAKESPEARE:

I cannot pay you back such a sum, Sir, not immediately and especially if you demand interest. You know I can't.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Then do as I ask, Will. Please? For *both* our sakes!

SHAKESPEARE again looks out from the stage, looking around *The Globe*, obviously trying to buy himself some time while considering what to do.

SHAKESPEARE (quietly):

I would have to persuade my business partners.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Your "business partners"?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, the co-owners of *The Globe*: Mister Hemings and Mister Condell, the company managers; and of course Mister Burbage, our leading man. Then, if I can persuade *them*, I would have to persuade the men - the players - themselves.

SOUTHAMPTON smiles, confidently.

SOUTHAMPTON:

I have no doubt you can do it, Will. You could persuade the lamb to lie down with the lion!

SOUTHAMPTON laughs, but *SHAKESPEARE* just looks very serious.

SHAKESPEARE:

We'll need paying. I mean, the men will need paying.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Of course. That goes without saying. In fact, I will pay handsomely!

SHAKESPEARE takes a deep breath.

SHAKESPEARE:

Then I will do my best to arrange it.

SOUTHAMPTON stares at him, seemingly overcome with emotion.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you, Will, thank you. *(Pause.)* I thank you, my noble Lord Essex thanks you and in time *England* will thank you!

SHAKESPEARE:

It will be thanks enough, my Lord, if you discharge me - once and for all, in a document to be signed and notarised by a lawyer - of my "debt" to you.

SOUTHAMPTON (nodding):

I will do it. Happily!

Smiling broadly, he looks around The Globe once more.

SOUTHAMPTON:

God, I love the theatre! As you yourself said: "All the world's a stage!"

SHAKESPEARE says nothing, but simply stares out from the stage.

SCENE THREE (BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE is sitting back down at his desk and BURBAGE, HEMINGS and CONDELL are all standing in front of him, staring at him in disbelief.

BURBAGE:

Did Southampton leave his *mind* in Ireland? We *can't* perform "Richard". If the Queen or any member of the Privy Council, especially Lord Cecil, finds out, we'll be killed. Or worse - sent to the Tower!

SHAKESPEARE:

I know. I told him that. But he didn't care.

He looks at them all in desperation.

SHAKESPEARE:

He *demands* that I do as he asks.

HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE all look horrified.

CONDELL:

Perhaps we - the rest of the company (*He looks at BURBAGE and HEMINGS*) - could find the money to repay him.

BURBAGE (nodding):

Yes. We could *all* help you to repay him.

HEMINGS nods in agreement, but SHAKESPEARE shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

No. It is typically kind of you all to offer, but no player, or even an entire *company* of players, could find such a large sum at such short notice, let alone the interest that has accrued on it.

BURBAGE:

But *this* - (*He stares at SHAKESPEARE.*) *This* is pulling the dragon's tail! You risk *everything*!

SHAKESPEARE:

I know, but I have no choice. (*Once again, he takes a deep breath.*) I owe him and I have to repay him. And *this* is the only way I can do it.

HEMINGS:

Then I'll do it too.

SHAKESPEARE looks at HEMINGS in surprise.

SHAKESPEARE:

What? *Why?*

HEMINGS:

For one thing, you can't play all the parts yourself.

SHAKESPEARE smiles.

HEMINGS:

For another thing, I don't much fancy having Southampton as a business partner or the company's playwright.

SHAKESPEARE smiles, ruefully.

HEMINGS:

And for a third thing, I owe you.

SHAKESPEARE looks puzzled.

SHAKESPEARE:

You don't owe me anything, John.

HEMINGS:

Yes I do. Without you, Will, I would still be a *part-time* actor and grocer, rather than a *part-owner* of the greatest theatre company in England - nay, the *world!*

He stares at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

I owe you *everything*, Will - my career, my fortune, *everything!* (*He looks at BURBAGE and CONDELL.*) We *all* do.

BURBAGE sighs heavily, then nods in agreement.

BURBAGE:

That's right, Will. Without you, I would never have been Richard the Third, or Henry the Fifth, or Falstaff.

CONDELL:

And I would still be a fishmonger, stinking of fish.

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

HEMINGS:

We all owe you, Will, for making us what we are today.

He looks round at BURBAGE and CONDELL.

HEMINGS:

That's why we'll help you to discharge your debt to Southampton, once and for all, so you can finally rid yourself of him.

SHAKESPEARE looks at them all warmly and smiles.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you - *all* of you.

HEMINGS:

However, there are a couple of conditions.

SHAKESPEARE:

Such as?

HEMINGS:

The production will only be for Essex's supporters - his "veterans" - and *not* the general public.

SHAKESPEARE:

Good. That will make it easier to keep it quiet.

HEMINGS:

And if any of the Queen's men should appear, we will stop performing *immediately*, or at least *drop* the deposition scene.

SHAKESPEARE:

That makes sense. (*Pause.*) Now we just have to persuade the men.

HEMINGS:

"The men"? We're not going to tell *them*.

SHAKESPEARE:

What? Why not?

HEMINGS:

Because it would only increase the chances of word getting out. No, we'll just tell them that it's a special production for a special audience and that's it.

SHAKESPEARE:

But they know the play is banned.

HEMINGS:

So? We'll just tell them that we've received special dispensation to perform it this one time. They won't know otherwise. *(Pause.)* No, we'll just keep the truth to ourselves and hope we can get away with it.

They all look round at each other nervously.

SCENE FOUR (THE WINGS OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE and HEMINGS, in costume as John of Gaunt and The Duke of York respectively, peer out from the wings of The Globe.

HEMINGS:

My God! It looks like there's a whole army out there.

SHAKESPEARE:

Literally. *(Pause.)* Here comes Southampton and his guards.

A loud burst of applause is heard (off-stage).

SHAKESPEARE:

Look at him waving to all the groundlings down below while he keeps all the seats above for himself and his retinue. *(Pause.)* He's obviously recognised some "old friends" in the audience.

HEMINGS:

They're not "old friends": they just fought under him in Ireland.
They serve him - just as we do.

A trumpet sounds to announce the start of the performance.

HEMINGS:

We are summoned.

HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE walk on stage and are met with applause.

SCENE FIVE (THE STAGE OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE, as John of Gaunt, sits in a chair, looking old and sickly, and HEMINGS, as The Duke of York, stands beside him.

SHAKESPEARE (as John of Gaunt):

"This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this *England*."

Immediately, there are a series of shouts (off-stage).

FIRST MAN (VOICE OFF):

England!

SECOND MAN (VOICE OFF):

Not Elizabeth!

THIRD MAN (VOICE OFF):

That's who we fight for!

SHAKESPEARE and HEMINGS look startled for a moment, before SHAKESPEARE resumes his speech.

SHAKESPEARE (as John of Gaunt):

"This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings..."

SCENE FIVE (THE WINGS AND STAGE OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE and HEMINGS are once again in the wings of The Globe, watching the action taking place on The Globe's stage.

SHAKESPEARE:

This is it - the deposition scene.

HEMINGS:

Pray God it's not the last scene we play!

BURBAGE (playing King Richard, complete with crown) and AUGUSTINE PHILIPS (another actor who plays the rebel, Bolingbroke) enter and walk on stage at The Globe. They approach each other slowly, then stop in the middle of the stage and stare at each other. Finally, BURBAGE removes the crown.

BURBAGE (as King Richard):

"I give this heavy weight from off my head."

In the wings, HEMINGS whispers to SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

The Queen won't surrender *her* throne, if that's what they're hoping for.

SHAKESPEARE stops looking at the stage and looks at HEMINGS.

SHAKESPEARE:

They can't be hoping for that - can they?

HEMINGS:

Well, if they are, they'll be severely disappointed.

They both look back at the action on stage.

PHILIPS (playing Bolingbroke) weeps over a coffin in the middle of the stage.

PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke):

"I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.
March sadly after."

PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke) leads off TWO LORDS, who carry the coffin. The stage empties and there is silence: then applause, followed by a series of cries.

AUDIENCE MEMBERS (off-stage):

God save our Gracious General!

OTHER AUDIENCE MEMBERS (also off-stage and even louder):

God save the Earl of Essex!

AUDIENCE (as one, almost deafeningly, off-stage):

GOD SAVE THE KING!

SHAKESPEARE, still watching from the wings, looks alarmed.

He and HEMINGS are joined in the wings by CONDELL and BURBAGE, and they all look confused as THE AUDIENCE continue cheering and chanting (VOICES OFF).

SHAKESPEARE:

Should we take a bow?

HEMINGS:

No. It's not us they're applauding. It's Essex - and he's not here to take a bow.

SHAKESPEARE:

I don't believe it!

HEMINGS:

What?

SHAKESPEARE (pointing off-stage):

Southampton's guards are handing out money to everyone as they leave.

CONDELL:

It's the first time I've seen an audience being *paid*, rather than *paying*, to attend a play.

HEMINGS:

It explains their enthusiasm.

SHAKESPEARE:

Quiet! Here comes Southampton.

SOUTHAMPTON enters and THE ACTORS immediately bow deeply.

SHAKESPEARE:

My Lord!

SOUTHAMPTON heads straight for SHAKESPEARE and shakes his hand.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you, Will. Thank you.

SHAKESPEARE:

You're very welcome, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you all! You were wonderful - just wonderful!

THE ACTORS all bow again, then SOUTHAMPTON takes out a letter from his pocket that is wrapped in a bright red ribbon.

SOUTHAMPTON:

By way of thanks to you, Will, here is that letter you sought, signed and notarised by a lawyer, discharging you of all debts to me.

SHAKESPEARE takes the letter and stares at it for a moment.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON:

And here - *(He produces a bulging bag of coins.)* - Is the payment for the rest of you. I think that you will find it exceeding generous. But you have earned every penny.

CONDELL comes forward to take the bag, but it is so heavy that he almost drops it, before taking hold of it with both hands and retreating backwards with it.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you once again, from myself and my Master. It was marvellous - all that we had hoped for! After such an exhilarating performance, we are emboldened!

Still smiling, SOUTHAMPTON exits, and ALL THE ACTORS bow once again. They wait for a moment, still bowing, to make sure he has gone, before rising. Then HEMINGS turns to face SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

"Emboldened" to do what?

THE OTHER ACTORS, including SHAKESPEARE, look at him questioningly.

SCENE FIVE (THE EARL OF ESSEX'S STUDY)

SOUTHAMPTON stares at an expectant-looking ARISTOCRAT, who is even more exquisitely attired than he is.

ARISTOCRAT (to SOUTHAMPTON):

How was the performance?

SOUTHAMPTON (smiling):

Magnificent, my lord! It rallied the troops wonderfully! Having seen a monarch surrender power on stage, they are ready to see one surrender power for real!

THE ARISTOCRAT - THE EARL OF ESSEX - laughs.

ESSEX:

They have seen that there is a precedent for what we do.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Indeed, my Lord.

ESSEX:

Like the supposed "rebel", Bolingbroke, our cause is just. *That* is why we will triumph.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Indubitably.

ESSEX:

It would be treason *not* to act. After all, if I do not claim the throne, who will? Scotland? France?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Even Spain! Where the Armada failed, so-called "diplomacy" may prevail.

ESSEX:

That cannot happen.

SOUTHAMPTON:

No. It cannot.

ESSEX looks at SOUTHAMPTON questioningly.

ESSEX:

Once we leave this room, Henry, there is no going back. The Queen will have me hung, drawn and quartered just for evading "house arrest", let alone "plotting" against her, as her so-called advisers, especially Lord Cecil, will no doubt describe it. And the same is true for any man who helps me. (*He stares at SOUTHAMPTON.*) If you want to leave me, Henry - to abandon me - go now. Otherwise, you must stay the course. (*SOUTHAMPTON does not move.*) Good. Then let us address the men.

He exits, followed by SOUTHAMPTON.

SCENE SIX (ESSEX'S COURTYARD)

ESSEX and SOUTHAMPTON re-enter and instantly there is a huge cheer (off-stage). ESSEX puts up a hand to stop the cheering and it stops immediately.

ESSEX:

Men, thank you for your support - your *loyalty!*

There is another huge cheer from his Veterans (off-stage).

ESSEX:

We will march to Whitehall and the whole city will rise as one to support us.

Once again, The Veterans cheer (off-stage).

ESSEX:

Then we shall have the glory - and the riches - that the Queen and Lord Cecil denied us in Ireland.

This elicits the loudest cheer of all (off-stage).

ESSEX and SOUTHAMPTON look at each other and smile triumphantly, then exit.

SCENE SEVEN (LONDON STREET)

ESSEX and SOUTHAMPTON enter, but so does a NOBLEMAN, who, upon seeing them, immediately draws his sword.

NOBLEMAN:

Halt! I am the Sheriff of London. Who goes there?

ESSEX:

'Tis I, Sheriff - the Earl of Essex.

SHERIFF:

My Lord Essex?

He looks behind ESSEX, looking off-stage at ESSEX'S VETERANS.

SHERIFF:

What do you mean by this show of force?

ESSEX:

I have come to reclaim my title of vice-regent. (*He extends a hand towards the SHERIFF.*) Come - join us.

THE SHERIFF looks even more astonished, then shakes his head.

SHERIFF:

Never. I must order you to lay down your arms, my Lord - at once!

ESSEX:

I will surrender neither my rights nor my claim.

SHERIFF:

Then, Sir, you are a traitor!

ESSEX:

Those are the words of Cecil and his parasites.

He draws his sword and looks round to give the order (off-stage).

ESSEX:

CHARGE!

The SHERIFF draws his sword and calls out in the other direction to his men (off-stage).

SHERIFF:

Hold your ground, men! Do not let them through!

ESSEX marches forward to confront THE SHERIFF: the two men fight, their swords clashing repeatedly. Then, there is a huge roar (off-stage), from behind THE SHERIFF. Both he and ESSEX stop fighting and look round in the direction the roar had come from.

ESSEX:

Who are they?

SHERIFF:

Reinforcements! Thank God - *and Lord Cecil!*

The roar (off-stage) grows as The Reinforcements obviously approach.

SOUTHAMPTON looks behind him (off-stage, in the other direction to the SHERIFF) at his own Men and suddenly looks startled.

SOUTHAMPTON:

My Lord!

ESSEX:

What is it?

SOUTHAMPTON:

It's the men, my Lord.

ESSEX:

What about them?

SOUTHAMPTON:

They're running away.

ESSEX:

WHAT?!

As ESSEX continues to stare off-stage, the sound (off-stage) of his Men running away, and many of their weapons being discarded with a succession of loud clangs as they go, is heard.

ESSEX:

Where are they going?

SHERIFF:

Your veterans, my Lord, are obviously tired of fighting.

SOUTHAMPTON:

We must flee, too, my Lord, or we'll be captured. Come on!

ESSEX continues to stare off-stage for a moment, in the direction his Men had gone, then SOUTHAMPTON takes him by the arm and starts leading him away. They both exit, watched by the SHERIFF.

SCENE EIGHT (THE EARL OF ESSEX'S STUDY)

ESSEX and SOUTHAMPTON re-enter, panting for breath, having obviously run back to Essex's house. Immediately, they begin assembling a makeshift barricade in Essex's study, by piling up a chair and other furniture against the door. They stand back, to see if the barricade can hold, but immediately TWO SOLDIERS enter and start battering away at it. Seeing that it is about to be broken, ESSEX turns to SOUTHAMPTON.

ESSEX:

There is nothing left but the Roman way.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Kill ourselves? But we will go to hell!

ESSEX:

'Tis better than the Tower.

Finally the "barricade" is broken down and the TWO SOLDIERS enter Essex's study.

FIRST SOLDIER:

Disarm them. The Queen will want them alive.

THE SECOND SOLDIER nods, draws his sword and advances towards SOUTHAMPTON and ESSEX, who back away until they are at the edge of the stage. ESSEX turns to SOUTHAMPTON and draws his sword.

ESSEX:

We must do it, Henry, before it's too late.

SOUTHAMPTON:

No, I cannot. I'll throw myself on the mercy of the Queen.

ESSEX stares at him in amazement.

ESSEX:

TURNCOAT!

ESSEX thrusts his sword at SOUTHAMPTON, who narrowly evades it. ESSEX is about to try again when THE SOLDIERS grab him from behind, wrestle his sword away and force him to the ground. As he continues to struggle, even as he is forced to the ground, SOUTHAMPTON lowers his sword, kneels down and begins to weep.

SCENE NINE (THE BACKSTAGE OFFICE OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

As before, SHAKESPEARE is seated, quill in hand, HEMINGS is mending a costume and CONDELL is counting money when BURBAGE enters, panting for breath, having obviously just run there.

SHAKESPEARE:

Richard! What's wrong?

BURBAGE:

Haven't you heard?

SHAKESPEARE:

Heard what?

BURBAGE:

Essex and Southampton have led a rebellion against the Queen.

SHAKESPEARE:

WHAT?!

HEMINGS:

Oh, my God!

BURBAGE:

The rebellion was an utter failure and both men, along with what remains of their "followers", are in the Tower.

CONDELL:

And we shall soon join them.

BURBAGE, HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE all look at CONDELL in horror.

SCENE TEN (THE STAGE OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE, BURBAGE, HEMINGS and CONDELL all stand on The Globe's stage, while BRYANT, a younger actor, sits on it. SHAKESPEARE addresses the AUDIENCE, who stand in for the rest of the Company of Players.

SHAKESPEARE:

That's why we've gathered you here, Men. I know we should have told you before, but we were trying to stop word getting out. And we obviously had no idea that Southampton was planning a rebellion: had we known, we would never have accepted the commission. But it's too late now.

He pauses and looks off-stage.

SHAKESPEARE:

The Queen's men will be here soon. By now, they'll have rounded up all of Essex's "sympathisers" and they will surely come for us next, doubtless having been informed of our "performance" for the rebels. When they do, what do we say?

HEMINGS laughs grimly.

SHAKESPEARE:

Pray tell, John, what amuses you?

HEMINGS:

You, Will.

SHAKESPEARE:

Me?

HEMINGS:

Yes, you, Will - the great "Shakespeare"! For the first time that I can remember, you are lost for words - lost for lines!

SHAKESPEARE:

Aye. 'Tis the first time.

HEMINGS:

I say we tell the truth.

SHAKESPEARE:

"The truth"?

HEMINGS:

Aye, that we - the entire company (*he addresses the AUDIENCE as he says this, as they represent the rest of the Company*) - owed Southampton a debt and only sought to discharge it.

CONDELL:

And is that debt above the debt of loyalty we owe the Queen?

He looks at HEMINGS questioningly.

CONDELL:

I think not. (*Pause.*) I say we stick to the money.

SHAKESPEARE:

"The money"?

CONDELL:

Aye. We say that we received a special commission, far in excess of what we would normally earn for a single performance, especially of an old play, which we did. The authorities - indeed, all of society - all think that players are little better than whores! Well, let us *act* like whores and say that we did it for the money - and no other reason.

THE OTHERS all stare at him for a moment.

HEMINGS:

That's a good idea, Henry.

CONDELL:

Thank you.

HEMINGS:

For once, we might just *profit* from their prejudices.

BRYANT:

Why not tell the truth, Will?

EVERYONE looks around and down at *BRYANT*, who is still sitting on the floor but is now looking up at *SHAKESPEARE* accusingly.

HEMINGS:

What do you mean, Bryant? In fact, what are you even doing here?

BRYANT:

You assembled the whole company (*like HEMINGS, he indicates the AUDIENCE to suggest the other members of the company*) and I have as much right to be here as any other member of the company. Now, I say again: why not tell the truth, Will?

SHAKESPEARE:

What "truth"?

BRYANT:

That you loved Southampton!

SHAKESPEARE:

WHAT?!

BRYANT:

I have read some of the Sonnets you wrote in his honour. I know not if it was as a son or as a lover -

SHAKESPEARE (even more incredulously):

WHAT?!

BRYANT:

But you loved him and that is why you have led us to our death.

SHAKESPEARE:

I do not "love" Southampton. If I ever did "love" him, I do not love him now. Now I hate him, for deceiving me!

BRYANT:

You must have known what he was planning.

SHAKESPEARE:

I did not! I knew he was loyal to Essex - everyone knew that - but I did not know that he was planning to start a rebellion the day after we performed for him! Had I known that, I would never have agreed to perform. He misled me: he used my debt to him, a debt I had to discharge, to make me do his bidding.

BRYANT:

It must have been a considerable debt.

HEMINGS walks over to BRYANT and stands over him.

HEMINGS:

It was - and we *all* owed it!

BRYANT:

I owe no man.

HEMINGS:

Oh, no? You owe Will! Without him, you would still be a tiler, or a carpenter, or whatever *menial* thing you were before you became a player, working twice as hard to earn half as much.

CONDELL:

Aye. And without a whorehouse next door to spend it in!

THE OTHERS laugh: BRYANT looks chastened and gets to his feet.

BRYANT:

I've had enough of this. I'm going!

HEMINGS:

Where?

BRYANT:

For a piss!

CONDELL:

Where? In a whore's mouth?!

Again, they all laugh at BRYANT and he exits. HEMINGS, CONDELL, SHAKESPEARE AND BURBAGE watch him go, then HEMINGS addresses the AUDIENCE as if they are the other assembled members of the company.

HEMINGS:

We *all* owe Will: without his plays, we would not be players! That is why *his* debt is *our* debt. And that is why we will stick together as a company - not just a company of players, but a company of men!

ALL (together):

AYE!

SHAKESPEARE looks around at them all, on and off the stage.

SHAKESPEARE:

Gentlemen, once again, I don't know what to say.

Suddenly an ARMY CAPTAIN enters The Globe and marches up to the stage.

CAPTAIN:

As part of the inquiry into the Earl of Essex's rebellion, the Lord Chief Justice orders you to appear before him.

ALL THE ACTORS just stare at him in amazement.

HEMINGS:

All of us?

The CAPTAIN looks them all over, then looks out at the AUDIENCE, taking in the large number of "Players" assembled.

CAPTAIN:

Choose one of your number to speak on your behalf.

ALL THE ACTORS look around at each other as THE CAPTAIN turns and exits.

SHAKESPEARE:

I will do it.

HEMINGS:

No, Will. You can't.

SHAKESPEARE:

Why not?

HEMINGS:

Because your long-standing relationship with Southampton will only strengthen the suspicion that we were part of the rebellion.

CONDELL:

He's right. It's better that you don't mention Southampton at all.

HEMINGS:

Someone else should speak for us.

CONDELL:

I suggest Augustine.

He points to AUGUSTINE, who is at the back of the assembled actors (i.e. the AUDIENCE).

PHILIPS:

Me? What? Why?

CONDELL:

Because you are the most innocent-looking among us: in fact, you are the *only* innocent-looking one among us!

THE OTHERS - except for PHILIPS himself - all laugh.

HEMINGS:

'Tis true, Augustine. That is why you always play "the hero"!

PHILIPS:

Bolingbroke is no "hero"! And this is not a play: this is real!

CONDELL:

You are best equipped to play the role of "spokesman", Augustine.

HEMINGS:

Aye.

PHILIPS still looks frightened.

HEMINGS:

Don't worry, Augustine. We'll prepare you.

CONDELL:

Aye. We'll stick to the "money" story.

SHAKESPEARE:

And I will compose a few lines for you to say to the Lord Chief Justice - omitting all mention of Southampton.

CONDELL:

Good.

HEMINGS (to SHAKESPEARE):

Compose them *well*: you have never written *anything* so important.

SHAKESPEARE looks nervous - even scared.

SCENE ELEVEN (COURTROOM)

A fearful-looking PHILIPS stands before THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE, who is seated, bewigged and studying a piece of paper he is holding. Finally, having read it, he puts it down on the desk.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

This is your statement, Mister Philips? On behalf of all your company?

PHILIPS:

Yes, my Lord.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

Then you are a liar as well as a traitor!

PHILIPS:

No, my Lord.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

You were part of the conspiracy against Her Majesty, weren't you? All of you!

PHILIPS:

No, my Lord. We knew of no conspiracy.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

Then why perform the play - especially such an *inflammatory* play - the day before the rebellion?

PHILIPS:

As I said in my statement, my Lord - *(He points at the piece of paper on the desk.)* We did it for the money. No other reason.

THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE look at him accusingly for a moment.

Then, slowly, his look of anger and accusation turns to a smile.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

Well, you are a player, I suppose, and players are little more than whores, so I can well believe that you would do *anything* for money. (*He laughs, cruelly, and PHILIPS smiles uneasily.*) Alright, Mister Philips. At the moment, there is no other evidence directly linking you and your company to the conspiracy, so for now you are dismissed - *pending* further inquiries.

PHILIPS:

Thank you, my Lord. Thank you.

PHILIPS bows, as if he were on stage. He turns to go, but a MESSENGER enters, carrying a note that he gives to the LORD CHIEF JUSTICE. THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE reads the message, smiles and looks up at PHILIPS.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

I have a message for you, Mister Philips.

PHILIPS:

For me, my Lord?

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

That is what I said: there's no need to repeat it.

PHILIPS:

No, my Lord. Sorry, my Lord. Who is it from?

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

The Queen.

PHILIPS:

"*THE QUEEN*"?!

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

That is what I said: again, there's no need to repeat it.

For a moment, PHILIPS looks as if he might collapse in shock, but then he steps forward, takes the note and reads it.

PHILIPS:

Oh my God!

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE (smiling broadly):

I thought you might be surprised.

SCENE TWELVE (THE STAGE OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

HEMINGS, CONDELL, SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE are all standing on the stage, looking at PHILIPS questioningly.

HEMINGS:

Well, Augustine? What's the upshot?

PHILIPS:

The upshot is that we are *not* suspected of being part of the conspiracy.

THE OTHER ACTORS all sigh with relief: some even cheer.

SHAKESPEARE:

You must have been a convincing witness, Augustine.

PHILIPS:

'Twas not me that convinced them, Will. 'Twas your "testimony".

SHAKESPEARE:

I'm pleased to hear it.

CONDELL:

So they were persuaded by the "money" story?

PHILIPS:

Aye. As you thought they would be.

CONDELL:

Good.

HEMINGS:

Thank God we players are of such *low* repute: they would never have believed us otherwise.

EVERYONE laughs, except PHILIPS.

SHAKESPEARE:

What is it, Augustine? Why do you still look so anxious?

PHILIPS:

Because we have received *another* commission.

SHAKESPEARE:

What? From who?

PHILIPS:

The Queen.

SHAKESPEARE:

WHAT?!

PHILIPS:

It's all in this note.

*He gives SHAKESPEARE the note he had received in the courtroom:
ALL THE OTHER ACTORS crowd round SHAKESPEARE to try to read it.*

HEMINGS:

What is't, Will? What does it say?

SHAKESPEARE:

It says Her Majesty desires that we perform for her.

HEMINGS:

What?! When?

SHAKESPEARE:

Tomorrow evening. *(Pause.)* The night before Southampton and Essex are executed.

HEMINGS:

Oh my God.

CONDELL:

Which play?

SHAKESPEARE:

Richard The Second.

CONDELL:

WHAT?!

SHAKESPEARE:

Complete with deposition scene.

For a moment, there is complete silence.

HEMINGS:

I don't understand. Having banned it, why does the Queen want us to perform *Richard* for her?

SHAKESPEARE:

Because she wants revenge.

HEMINGS:

"Revenge"?

SHAKESPEARE:

Aye. We will perform for her, as we performed for the rebels, and then we will be killed - just like the rebels.

THE OTHER PLAYERS, including HEMINGS AND CONDELL, stare at him.

SCENE THIRTEEN (BACKSTAGE/"DRESSING ROOM" AT THE PALACE)

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and CONDELL, in costume for their roles in Richard The Second, are backstage at the palace, waiting to go on, peering out at their audience.

HEMINGS:

They're all out there, waiting for us - even the Queen herself!

SHAKESPEARE:

We should have fled.

HEMINGS:

Where to? Cecil has spies all over England - all over Europe! He would find us wherever we went.

CONDELL:

Besides, if we ran away it would only confirm their suspicions.

HEMINGS:

Exactly! We must go on.

SHAKESPEARE sighs, heavily.

SHAKESPEARE:

I suppose we must.

BURBAGE and PHILIPS enter, also in costume for "Richard": SHAKESPEARE addresses them, and the actual AUDIENCE, who, as before, constitute the rest of the company.

SHAKESPEARE:

Gentlemen, I want to thank you - and apologise to you.

HEMINGS:

What for, Will? You owe us no apology.

CONDELL:

Nor explanation.

SHAKESPEARE:

I do! Unwittingly, perhaps carelessly, I have led us all to this point and if my fears are proved correct, then -

HEMINGS:

Quiet, Will!

SHAKESPEARE:

What?

HEMINGS:

For once, you must be quiet.

CONDELL:

Aye. Say nothing.

They all laugh, except SHAKESPEARE, who looks confused.

SHAKESPEARE:

Why?

HEMINGS:

For one thing, we are about to go on stage and must concentrate our minds. For another, you owe us nothing - and certainly not an apology!

SHAKESPEARE:

I do!

HEMINGS:

No, you don't! As I've said before, 'tis we who owe you - our careers, indeed our lives.

CONDELL:

If we lose them now, well, at least we have something to lose. Before we had nothing!

HEMINGS:

That's right. Without you, Will, we'd all still be tiling walls, or thatching roofs, or selling fruit -

CONDELL:

Or fish.

HEMINGS:

While *waiting* for a chance to act. Instead, here we are: about to perform for the Queen of England herself. That's something a mere grocer -

CONDELL:

Or fishmonger.

HEMINGS:

Could only dream of.

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

HEMINGS:

Take your positions, men.

ALL THE ACTORS immediately stand to attention: HEMINGS addresses them, and the AUDIENCE.

HEMINGS:

Tonight's performance is a very special one. It may even be our last performance together.

PHILIPS looks as if he might cry: he has to choke back tears.

HEMINGS:

So let us make it a memorable one -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting):

One fit for a Queen!

EVERYONE laughs, and HEMINGS smiles at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

You always have to have the last word, don't you?

SHAKESPEARE:

Tonight I do.

A trumpet sounds to announce the start of the performance.

HEMINGS (to all the players):

Good luck, men.

Then, as one, they all exit, to walk on stage.

SCENE FOURTEEN (THE "STAGE" AT COURT)

THE ACTORS walk onto the "stage" and stare out at their audience (i.e. the actual AUDIENCE). For a moment, they seem to be frozen with fear. Then BURBAGE - the consummate professional - speaks.

BURBAGE (as King Richard):

"Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster,
Hast thou according to thy oath and bond
Brought hither Henry Hereford, thy bold son..."

As BURBAGE speaks, SHAKESPEARE stares at the audience and is still staring at them when he slowly becomes aware that THE OTHER ACTORS, including BURBAGE, are all staring at him: for a moment he is puzzled, then realises why and remembers his line.

SHAKESPEARE (as John of Gaunt):

"I have, my liege."

HEMINGS looks at him and mouths the word, "Concentrate": SHAKESPEARE nods in acknowledgement and BURBAGE resumes.

BURBAGE:

"Tell me moreover..."

SCENE FIFTEEN (THE "STAGE" AT COURT)

BURBAGE (as Richard) is centre-stage with CONDELL, who is playing a Courtier.

BURBAGE (as King Richard):

"For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground,
And tell sad stories of the death of kings -

How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed -
All murdered."

On hearing these last two words, CONDELL gasps, then BURBAGE shoots him a look and he composes himself again.

SCENE SIXTEEN (THE "STAGE" AT COURT)

BURBAGE (as Richard) is lying in the coffin in the centre of the stage, surrounded by PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke) and TWO LORDS.

PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke):

"I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.
March sadly after."

PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke) leads off his LORDS, who carry the coffin containing BURBAGE (as Richard).

SCENE SEVENTEEN (BACKSTAGE/DRESSING ROOM AT COURT)

SHAKESPEARE waits backstage: the coffin is carried off stage and BURBAGE immediately leaps out of it, stands up and stares at SHAKESPEARE.

BURBAGE (to SHAKESPEARE):

Well...?

SHAKESPEARE:

"Well" what?

BURBAGE looks at him in disbelief.

BURBAGE:

Did she *like* it?

SHAKESPEARE looks at him in disbelief.

SHAKESPEARE:

Honestly, Richard: you and your *vanity!* How could that possibly matter now?

BURBAGE looks at SHAKESPEARE in disbelief.

BURBAGE:

Because if she liked it, she may not kill us - *that's* why!

Suddenly, off-stage, the sound of clapping - by just one person - is heard: faintly at first, but then with growing volume. Then others join in, adding to it, until finally it becomes almost deafening.

SHAKESPEARE:

She liked it!

BURBAGE:

And because *she* likes it, everyone else has to, as well.

SHAKESPEARE:

Even Lord Cecil.

SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE laugh.

HEMINGS:

For God's sake, don't keep her waiting! Get back on stage for your bow.

ALL THE ACTORS immediately exit, rushing back on stage.

SCENE EIGHTEEN (THE "STAGE" AT COURT)

HEMINGS, CONDELL, BURBAGE and SHAKESPEARE enter and stand centre-stage, bowing as the applause (off-stage) continues, and as they bow they continue to exchange looks of surprise. Suddenly the applause stops. Then, breathing heavily (as it obviously requires enormous effort for her to move, such is her great age and infirmity), THE QUEEN - ELIZABETH I - enters, climbing up on stage. ALL THE ACTORS, including SHAKESPEARE, bow before her.

QUEEN:

Master Shakespeare...

Still bowing, SHAKESPEARE strains his neck to look up at her.

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, your Majesty?

QUEEN:

Come here.

He stands up and walks over until he is beside her: THE OTHER ACTORS watch him, but THE QUEEN looks at them all dismissively.

QUEEN:

The rest of you may go.

Immediately THE OTHER ACTORS exit, some of them still bowing as they go: THE QUEEN watches them go, then stares at SHAKESPEARE.

QUEEN:

Fortunately for you, Master Shakespeare, I am a great admirer of your work.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you, your Majesty. You are too kind.

QUEEN:

I know!

For a moment, SHAKESPEARE is taken aback by this; then he bows again.

QUEEN:

I enjoyed the play, but you will never perform it again with the deposition scene while I am alive. Do you understand?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, your Majesty. Of course, your Majesty.

QUEEN:

Good. And one final thing...

She stares at him again.

QUEEN:

I am Richard the Second. Know ye not that?

SHAKESPEARE looks stunned.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, your Majesty. I did not know.

QUEEN:

Well, I am. Essex merely *thought* he was Bolingbroke, the rebel who could steal a crown, but I *am* Richard.

And with that, she exits, again breathing heavily as she goes.

SHAKESPEARE (calling after her):

Thank you, your Majesty! Thank you!

He exits as quickly as he can, following the OTHERS off-stage, still bowing as he walks backwards, until finally he exits.

SCENE NINETEEN (DRESSING ROOM AT COURT)

As SHAKESPEARE enters, HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE all look at him questioningly.

HEMINGS:

What did she say to you?

SHAKESPEARE:

She said she enjoyed the play.

HEMINGS:

Good.

SHAKESPEARE:

But we are not to perform it again with the deposition scene while she is alive.

HEMINGS:

That's only to be expected.

SHAKESPEARE:

And then she said, "I am Richard the Second. Know ye not that?"

HEMINGS:

WHAT?!

HEMINGS and ALL THE OTHER ACTORS stare at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

What did she mean?

SHAKESPEARE:

I don't know. And I certainly wasn't going to ask!

SHAKESPEARE sighs, exhaling with exhaustion and relief.

SHAKESPEARE:

Now I suggest we all exit immediately, before she changes her mind and has us killed after all.

HEMINGS:

Agreed.

THE ACTORS hastily gather up all their props and costumes, then exit.

SCENE TWENTY (THE PALACE GROUNDS)

Still in their costumes, SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE enter the palace grounds smiling and laughing.

SHAKESPEARE:

The night air ne'er smelled so sweet.

HEMINGS:

Indeed.

SHAKESPEARE:

Even *I* cannot find words to describe it.

They all laugh. Suddenly, however, they all stop laughing and stop walking as a MASKED MAN enters, carrying a coil of rope over his shoulder. He is evidently a HANGMAN and for a moment he stops walking and looks at THE ACTORS, then continues walking past them.

BURBAGE:

He must be preparing the gallows for Essex.

SHAKESPEARE:

Aye. And Southampton.

HEMINGS:

But why here? Why not the Tower?

SHAKESPEARE:

Obviously, this is another "show" that the Queen wants to see for herself.

There is silence for a moment.

BURBAGE:

You know, Will, this would be fitting subject matter for a play.

SHAKESPEARE looks confused.

SHAKESPEARE:

What would?

BURBAGE:

This - this night, this whole story.

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and CONDELL all stare at him.

HEMINGS:

Not in our lifetime.

CONDELL:

And certainly not in the Queen's.

BURBAGE considers this for a moment, before nodding in agreement.

BURBAGE:

True, but it is a great story. It has *everything*: treason, rebellion and, most importantly, *majesty*!

SHAKESPEARE considers this for a moment. Then -

SHAKESPEARE:

'Tis a plot more fanciful than any I wrote.

For a moment, BURBAGE, HEMINGS and CONDELL all stare at SHAKESPEARE. Then SHAKESPEARE walks on silently and they all follow him, exiting.

Slowly the lights come down. And if there is an interval, it comes here.

ACT THREE (TRAGEDY) : 1616

SCENE ONE (SHAKESPEARE'S STUDY, HIS HOUSE, STRATFORD ON AVON)

SHAKESPEARE, now 51 and almost completely bald, stands in the middle of his study dictating his will to his lawyer, FRANCIS COLLINS, a small, bespectacled man, who is also in his 50s and sitting at a desk, quill in hand.

SHAKESPEARE:

...And finally, I give to my fellows Richard Burbage, John Hemings and Henry Condell twenty-six shillings and eight pence apiece to buy them mourning rings.

COLLINS writes this down, then puts down his quill and looks up at SHAKESPEARE.

COLLINS:

May I inquire, Mr Shakespeare, who Mr Hemings and Mr Condell are? I am familiar with the *other* beneficiaries of your will - including, of course, Mr Burbage, the greatest actor of our age.

SHAKESPEARE:

Alas, he is too old, and ill, to act much now.

COLLINS:

However, I am *not* familiar with Mr Hemings and Mr Condell.

SHAKESPEARE:

They are the finest of men: the finest of friends. They were with me from the beginning: they were with me to the end. In fact, when The Globe burned down three years ago, it was John and Henry, along with Richard, who bought my share in the company, allowing me to return to Stratford. Consequently I wish to remember them.

COLLINS:

Indeed. Rightly so.

COLLINS looks the will over and appears satisfied.

COLLINS:

Now I just need you to sign it and date it.

SHAKESPEARE comes over to the desk, takes the quill from COLLINS and signs and dates the will: he goes to hand the quill back to COLLINS, but COLLINS obviously notices that something is awry.

COLLINS (pointing at the will):

It is 1616 now, Mr Shakespeare, not 1615.

SHAKESPEARE stares down at the will and realises his mistake.

SHAKESPEARE:

Forgive me, Mr Collins. The change of year always catches me out.

COLLINS:

You're not alone in that.

SHAKESPEARE corrects the date and hands the quill back to COLLINS. Once again, COLLINS checks over the will and this time he seems satisfied.

COLLINS:

That is everything. As instructed, I shall retain a copy of the will in our office in Warwick and you can write to me at any point to alter it.

SHAKESPEARE:

Very good.

COLLINS *puts the will in a slim leather bag.*

COLLINS:

May I ask another question?

SHAKESPEARE:

Of course.

COLLINS:

Why are you making a will now? I hope you are not unwell.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, Mr Collins - I am *very* well! Very well indeed.

COLLINS:

Then why make a will? It is usually only the *dying* who make one.

SHAKESPEARE:

Judith, my youngest daughter, is getting married next month and I want to put everything in place to provide her with a suitable dowry - *and* inheritance.

COLLINS:

Ah, I see. In that case, congratulations are in order.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you. It promises to be a *joyous* union!

COLLINS:

I trust the groom is a young man of good standing.

SHAKESPEARE:

Indeed. In fact, he is the son of an old friend.

COLLINS:

Excellent. Then I wish you every felicitation.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you.

COLLINS picks up his bag, stands up and goes towards the door.

COLLINS:

Good day, Mister Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE:

Good day to you, Mister Collins.

SHAKESPEARE watches him go out, then smiles.

SHAKESPEARE (quietly, to himself):

That's one thing done.

SCENE TWO (THE DINING ROOM, SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE)

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and CONDELL sit at the dining table, amid the detritus of the wedding feast, smoking clay tobacco pipes.

SHAKESPEARE:

It's been a great day.

HEMINGS:

I'll say! The whole town turned out for you.

CONDELL:

Burbage will be sorry he missed it.

SHAKESPEARE:

He's too ill to travel: he said so in his letter. Nevertheless, it was a great day and not just because I have married off the last of my daughters.

HEMINGS and CONDELL laugh, but he looks at them very seriously.

SHAKESPEARE:

Today, as I walked Judith to church, I thought of another occasion when I had walked down the high street in Stratford with crowds lined up on either side.

He pauses and HEMINGS and CONDELL both look at him questioningly.

SHAKESPEARE:

It was nearly forty years ago and I was with *my* Father, only that day the crowds were *jeering*, not *cheering*, because my Father, having served on the town council for a *decade* - having been a *magistrate*, even - had been stripped of his powers and position.

HEMINGS and CONDELL both look surprised.

SHAKESPEARE:

He had been found guilty of "usury and illegal trading in wool". It was all a *lie*, of course, but he was paraded through the town like a thief!

Now HEMINGS and CONDELL stare at him in amazement.

HEMINGS:

You never told us this.

SHAKESPEARE:

It's only now that I *can* tell you.

CONDELL:

How so?

SHAKESPEARE:

Because today it was as if that *shame* - that *stain* on the "Shakespeare" family name - was finally expunged.

He stares at HEMINGS and CONDELL.

SHAKESPEARE:

I have dedicated my life to rebuilding my Father's fortune, the fortune that was so cruelly stolen from him, but it was only today, when the whole town turned out to watch me lead my daughter to church, that I felt our *reputation* - "the immortal part" of ourselves, as I once wrote - was restored. (*He smiles at them both.*) But that is enough about the past. Now I want to look forward to the future and the union of the Shakespeares and the Quineys.

He raises his glass.

SHAKESPEARE:

To the Shakespeares and the Quineys.

HEMINGS and CONDELL raise their glasses, while still looking surprised at what they have just heard.

HEMINGS AND CONDELL (together):

"The Shakespeares and the Quineys."

SCENE THREE (HALLWAY, SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE, STRATFORD)

There is a loud knocking - indeed, hammering - at the front door. SHAKESPEARE enters in his nightgown.

SHAKESPEARE (calling out):

Alright! I'm coming! There's no need to wake the dead!

He goes up to the front door and opens it to find JUDITH, his daughter, who is aged about 30, standing in the doorway. She looks distraught, with her hair tangled (as if she has been tearing at it), and she is also wearing a nightgown, covered by a blanket.

SHAKESPEARE:

Judith! What's wrong? Why are you here?

JUDITH looks up at him - and immediately bursts into tears.

SHAKESPEARE:

Come inside and tell me.

He ushers her inside and closes the door behind her.

SHAKESPEARE:

Now, please tell me what's wrong?

JUDITH:

I'm not sure I can.

SHAKESPEARE:

Of course you can: that's *why* you came here.

JUDITH looks up at him, then nods her head.

JUDITH:

It's Thomas, Father.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Thomas"? What's wrong with him? Is he ill?

JUDITH:

No, Father. He's been -

She pauses again, obviously unable to say any more.

SHAKESPEARE:

Go on - tell me.

JUDITH:

He's been *arrested*.

She starts crying again and SHAKESPEARE looks astonished.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Arrested"? What for?

JUDITH hesitates as she is embarrassed, or even ashamed.

JUDITH:

"Unlawful copulation and abandonment".

SHAKESPEARE looks at her in disbelief.

SHAKESPEARE:

WHAT?!

There is a long pause as he continues to stare at her.

SHAKESPEARE:

Who did he - *(He pauses, obviously trying to choose the right word)* abandon?

JUDITH:

A woman called Margaret Wheeler.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Margaret Wheeler"? I've never heard of her.

JUDITH:

Neither had I - until the Constables read out her name just now.

SHAKESPEARE continues to stare at her, obviously speechless, if only temporarily.

JUDITH:

She died in childbirth last week.

SHAKESPEARE:

WHAT?!

Obviously unable to meet his gaze, JUDITH looks at the floor.

JUDITH:

And the child died too.

For a moment, there is silence.

SHAKESPEARE:

Where is he?

JUDITH:

At the courthouse - the *church* courthouse.

SHAKESPEARE:

"The *church* courthouse"?

JUDITH:

Yes. Apparently, because of the nature of the charges against him, he will be tried in an ecclesiastical court. Oh, Father, can you help him?

SHAKESPEARE:

"Help" him? *How?*

JUDITH:

By using your wealth and influence to secure his release.

SHAKESPEARE looks shocked.

SHAKESPEARE:

I'm not sure my "wealth and influence", as you put it, extend that far.

JUDITH:

Oh, they do - they do! *(She looks at him almost maniacally.)*
You're the richest and most powerful man in Stratford, Father.
If anyone can help Thomas, it's you.

He looks at her in alarm.

JUDITH:

Please help him: if not for his own sake, then for mine.

Once again, she begins to cry.

JUDITH:

I know he didn't do it, Father. He'd never do such a thing.
(Pause.) He's a gentleman.

SHAKESPEARE looks at her questioningly for a moment.

SHAKESPEARE:

I'll see if I can be of any assistance to him.

JUDITH:

Oh, thank you, Father, thank you. *(Pause.)* I knew I could
rely on you.

SHAKESPEARE:

You always can, my dear. You always can.

He takes her in his arms and she starts to cry again.

SCENE FOUR (JAIL CELL)

SHAKESPEARE (now fully dressed) enters a jail cell and Judith's husband, THOMAS QUINEY, a young man of about 30 who is wearing a generic grey prisoner's uniform, stands up from the grubby bed he is sitting on.

THOMAS:

Thank you for coming.

SHAKESPEARE:

I came as soon as Judith told me.

THOMAS indicates the bed behind him.

THOMAS:

Please - have a seat.

SHAKESPEARE looks down at the grubby bed, then shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, thank you. I'll stand.

THOMAS remains standing too.

SHAKESPEARE:

I have sent word to my lawyer, Mr Collins, and I am sure he will be here shortly. He will go over everything with you: the charges against you; your defence; everything. He is an immensely capable man and I am sure he can help.

THOMAS looks alarmed.

THOMAS:

I can't afford a lawyer.

SHAKESPEARE:

Don't worry, Thomas: I'll pay. After all, you're a member of the family now.

THOMAS looks simultaneously flattered and embarrassed.

SHAKESPEARE:

However, before Mr Collins arrives, there is something I must ask you.

THOMAS (nodding):

Of course. Anything.

SHAKESPEARE:

Did you do it?

THOMAS sits back down on the bed and stares at the ground.

SHAKESPEARE:

I'm not sure you understand the seriousness of the situation you are in, Thomas. I have spoken to the court officials and they told me that the offences you've been charged with are the most serious offences that can be tried in a church court. If you are found guilty of them, you could be punished by excommunication.

THOMAS looks terrified.

THOMAS:

"Excommunication"?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes. And flogging.

THOMAS looks even more terrified.

THOMAS:

"Flogging"?

SHAKESPEARE:

Aye. In public and - if the court deems it appropriate - to within an inch of your life.

THOMAS:

Oh my God.

He looks down at the floor and puts his head in his hands.

SHAKESPEARE:

So, before we go any further, you must tell me the truth.
(Pause.) Did you do it?

THOMAS does not reply but simply continues to stare at the ground.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thomas, if you don't tell me the truth, neither I nor Mister Collins can do anything to help you.

Still THOMAS says nothing.

SHAKESPEARE:

I was a young man myself once, so I know the temptations that can arise.

THOMAS looks up at him in surprise.

THOMAS:

You do?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, of course. So I ask you again: did you do it? Did you have "carnal relations" with this woman - ? (*He takes out a piece of paper from his jacket pocket.*) "Margaret Wheeler".

THOMAS stares at him for a moment before finally speaking.

THOMAS:

Yes. I did.

He begins to cry.

SHAKESPEARE:

Given that she died in childbirth, and was apparently near the full term of her pregnancy, it must have happened last summer.

THOMAS (nodding, while still crying):

Yes.

SHAKESPEARE:

When you began courting Judith.

THOMAS begins to sob.

THOMAS:

Yes.

SHAKESPEARE:

Who was she?

THOMAS:

Just a local girl.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Local"? (*Again, he glances at the piece of paper.*) I don't know the name "Wheeler".

THOMAS:

Well, she's from Arden - the forest.

SHAKESPEARE:

Oh.

THOMAS looks up at him.

THOMAS:

She was a *WHORE!*

SHAKESPEARE:

What?!

THOMAS:

She must have been. She used her *wiles* to lure me into bed. (*He smiles ruefully.*) I say "bed": it was actually the forest floor.

He puts his arms out, as if pleading with SHAKESPEARE.

THOMAS:

It only happened once. And I didn't know she was pregnant. I swear it!

For a moment, SHAKESPEARE looks at him questioningly. Then -

SHAKESPEARE:

Alright. I believe you.

THOMAS looks surprised.

THOMAS:

You do?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, of course.

THOMAS smiles.

THOMAS:

Thank you.

As quickly as the smile appeared, it vanishes.

THOMAS:

But what am I going to do? I don't want to be *excommunicated*, or *flogged*.

Finally SHAKESPEARE sits down on the bed beside him.

SHAKESPEARE:

Just do what Mr Collins tells you to do and say what he tells you to say.

THOMAS:

Right. Of course.

SHAKESPEARE:

And don't worry, Thomas. I'm sure we can save you from the worst.

THOMAS smiles at him.

THOMAS:

Thank you, Will. (Pause.) Thank you, Father.

And with that, he leans against SHAKESPEARE, hugging him. SHAKESPEARE looks surprised for a moment, then slowly puts an arm around him.

SCENE FIVE (SHAKESPEARE'S STUDY)

There is a knock at the door.

SHAKESPEARE:

Come in.

MR COLLINS enters, carrying his bag, and SHAKESPEARE smiles broadly.

SHAKESPEARE:

Ah, Mr Collins. I'm delighted to see you. Are we all set for court tomorrow?

MR COLLINS:

Yes, I think we can mount a strong defence, especially with you testifying on his behalf. But there is something that I must bring to your attention *before* the trial.

SHAKESPEARE looks puzzled.

SCENE SIX (COURTROOM)

SHAKESPEARE AND JUDITH sit together at the back of the courtroom: THOMAS AND MR COLLINS sit together at the front. THOMAS turns round and nervously glances back at SHAKESPEARE AND JUDITH, but then quickly turns round again to face the front as a COURT OFFICIAL enters.

COURT OFFICIAL:

All rise for the court's verdict.

THOMAS, MR COLLINS, SHAKESPEARE and JUDITH all immediately stand up. Then a SENIOR "JUDGE" (who, in reality, is a Senior Priest) enters and sits down at the raised platform at the front of the courtroom. He surveys the courtroom and those in it before speaking.

SENIOR PRIEST:

Thomas Quiney, you are found *guilty* of the charge of having unlawful carnal relations.

THOMAS and JUDITH look devastated, but MR COLLINS and SHAKESPEARE's calm expressions do not change.

SENIOR PRIEST (continuing):

Ordinarily I would impose a severe punishment, one involving public penance.

THOMAS bows his head.

SENIOR PRIEST:

However, we have borne in mind your previously unblemished reputation, and the fact that your father-in-law, Mr Shakespeare, who has been a *true* friend to this town in times of need - such as the recent outbreak of *plague* - testified on your behalf as a character witness.

THOMAS looks round quickly at SHAKESPEARE before quickly turning back round again to face the "JUDGE".

SENIOR PRIEST:

For those reasons, I have commuted your sentence to a fine of five shillings.

THOMAS and JUDITH look amazed, SHAKESPEARE and MR COLLINS considerably less so.

THOMAS:

A fine, your grace?

SENIOR PRIEST:

Yes, which must be paid immediately.

MR COLLINS (speaking up):

Your grace, my client's father-in-law, Mr Shakespeare, will pay the fine - immediately.

SENIOR PRIEST:

Good. Then the court is dismissed.

He strikes the desk with his gavel, gets up slowly and then he and the COURT OFFICIAL exit.

THOMAS calls out after them.

THOMAS:

Thank you, your grace. Thank you. And God bless you!

THOMAS turns around and JUDITH immediately runs into his arms and they embrace, and kiss, passionately: SHAKESPEARE and MR COLLINS both look embarrassed, until finally they stop kissing.

THOMAS:

I can't believe I only have to pay a fine - and such a small one! *(He looks at SHAKESPEARE.)* This was your doing, wasn't it?

SHAKESPEARE shrugs.

SHAKESPEARE:

Let's just say that in addition to the fine I made a *contribution* towards the court's "running costs".

MR COLLINS, who is putting away all his papers in his bag, smiles.

THOMAS (to SHAKESPEARE):

Thank you.

SHAKESPEARE:

You're welcome.

THOMAS smiles warmly at SHAKESPEARE, but SHAKESPEARE does not smile back.

THOMAS:

We must celebrate.

SHAKESPEARE looks surprised.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Celebrate"? Celebrate what?

THOMAS:

Why, my freedom, of course.

SHAKESPEARE nods, belatedly understanding.

SHAKESPEARE:

Of course. Your freedom.

He glances at MR COLLINS, who is still standing by the desk, then looks back at THOMAS.

SHAKESPEARE (to THOMAS):

You go ahead. I have to pay your fine and I also have some other business to settle with Mr Collins.

THOMAS:

As you wish.

THOMAS looks round at MR COLLINS.

THOMAS:

And thank you too, Mr Collins.

JUDITH (to MR COLLINS):

Yes, thank you.

MR COLLINS:

You are *both* most welcome.

Finally, SHAKESPEARE comes forward until he is standing directly beside THOMAS.

SHAKESPEARE:

After you've finished "celebrating", come and see me tomorrow morning.

THOMAS looks surprised.

THOMAS:

What for?

SHAKESPEARE:

We need to discuss the future.

THOMAS nods.

THOMAS:

Of course. I'll come first thing.

THOMAS and JUDITH exit, arm in arm: SHAKESPEARE and MR COLLINS watch them go, then turn and stare at each other.

SCENE SEVEN (SHAKESPEARE'S STUDY)

SHAKESPEARE is sitting at his desk: he is not reading or writing but simply staring at the door, when there is a faint knock at it.

SHAKESPEARE:

Come in.

THOMAS enters, looking dishevelled and sickly, i.e. hungover.

SHAKESPEARE:

Ah, Thomas. Thank you for coming.

THOMAS comes in and slumps in the chair in front of the desk.

SHAKESPEARE:

I trust you had an enjoyable evening.

THOMAS:

Yes. We were at my Father's house. You should have come.

SHAKESPEARE:

As I said yesterday, I had some business to attend to with Mr Collins. In fact, that is why I wanted to see you now.

THOMAS:

Oh, yes?

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes. You see, Mr Collins found out the truth about you and Margaret Wheeler.

THOMAS looks surprised.

THOMAS:

I told you the truth.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, you didn't. Mr Collins found out that far from being a "whore", as you described her, Margaret Wheeler was, in fact, the entirely innocent daughter of a woodcutter from Arden. He also found out that, far from *encountering* her only the once, as you said, you *encountered* her several times; that, in fact,

you were well known to her and her family; that, in fact, you were as good as *engaged* to her and it was only when she became *pregnant* - a development you *definitely* knew about - that you turned your attention to Judith, a woman with none of Margaret's innate natural beauty but an infinitely larger dowry.

THOMAS looks as if he might be sick - literally.

THOMAS:

I can explain -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting):

There's no need to: I know *everything*.

He smiles, ruefully.

SHAKESPEARE:

You should be grateful that the ecclesiastical court and its officials are not as *assiduous* in the gathering of evidence as Mr Collins is. Otherwise, they would have uncovered the truth themselves and I would have been powerless to prevent you from being flogged and excommunicated.

THOMAS looks confused.

THOMAS:

Why *did* you prevent me from being flogged and excommunicated? (Pause.) It's what I deserve.

SHAKESPEARE:

It *is* what you deserve, but I couldn't bear the thought of Judith watching her husband - her husband of less than a *month!* - being publicly humiliated! Besides, I couldn't bear the thought of watching *another* family member being paraded through the streets.

THOMAS (looking confused):

What?

SHAKESPEARE:

No matter. So instead, I have settled on a *private* punishment.

THOMAS looks fearful.

THOMAS:

What are you going to do?

SHAKESPEARE:

I know what I would *like* to do. I would *like* to cast you out: to *terminate* your marriage to my daughter and *demand* the repayment of her dowry.

THOMAS looks even more fearful.

SHAKESPEARE:

But I cannot do that. You were married in church - in the eyes of *God!* - so, however much I would like to, I cannot "tear you asunder".

THOMAS looks a little relieved.

SHAKESPEARE:

However, I *can* - indeed, I *will* - prevent you from getting your hands on any more of my money, or Judith's.

THOMAS looks appalled.

THOMAS:

How?

SHAKESPEARE:

I have altered the terms of my will, to ensure that Judith's inheritance will go to her and her alone; that, in the event of your *abandoning* her as you abandoned Margaret Wheeler, you will not receive a penny from my estate; that, in short, you are no longer *legally*, or perhaps I should say *financially*, part of the family.

THOMAS looks horrified.

SHAKESPEARE:

Now, if you will excuse me, there are a number of other people I need to see.

He gets up and goes towards the door: THOMAS watches him go out, then slumps back fully in his seat, looking even sicker than before.

SCENE EIGHT (HALLWAY, RICHARD QUINEY'S HOUSE)

There is a loud knocking at the door. RICHARD QUINEY, Thomas's father - who, like his son, looks hungover - enters and goes to the door: he opens it to find SHAKESPEARE standing there, looking angry.

RICHARD QUINEY:

Will! What are you doing here? Come in.

SHAKESPEARE enters and RICHARD QUINEY closes the door behind him.

RICHARD QUINEY:

Please excuse my current state of dishevelment: we were up until late last night celebrating Thomas's release.

SHAKESPEARE:

I know. I've just seen Thomas.

RICHARD QUINEY:

Oh, right.

SHAKESPEARE stares at RICHARD QUINEY for a moment.

RICHARD QUINEY:

What is it?

SHAKESPEARE:

You knew, didn't you?

RICHARD QUINEY:

What?

SHAKESPEARE:

About Thomas's *relationship* with Margaret Wheeler.

RICHARD QUINEY:

Oh...

RICHARD QUINEY suddenly looks as ashamed as his son had earlier.

RICHARD QUINEY:

I didn't "know" -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting):

You *must* have known! He's your son!

RICHARD QUINEY (continuing):

But I *suspected*.

SHAKESPEARE looks absolutely furious.

RICHARD QUINEY:

I wanted to say something, Will - I did, truly - but I knew that Thomas was *fond* of your daughter -

SHAKESPEARE:

"Fond"?

RICHARD QUINEY:

So, when they became engaged, I kept quiet. (*Pause.*) I didn't know that Margaret was pregnant.

SHAKESPEARE:

But you knew - or at least "*suspected*" - that Thomas had had *relations* with her?

RICHARD bows his head and stares at the ground.

RICHARD QUINEY:

I did.

SHAKESPEARE smiles at him coolly - indeed, cruelly.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you. Now I can omit *all* mention of the name "Quiney" from my will.

RICHARD QUINEY looks horrified, but SHAKESPEARE quickly exits: QUINEY watches him go, looking even more sickly than before.

SCENE NINE (JUDITH'S HOUSE, STRATFORD ON AVON)

There is a knocking at the door and a distraught-looking JUDITH (she looks as if she is about to cry) opens it, to find her father - SHAKESPEARE - standing there. She turns round and goes into the house and he follows her, closing the door behind him. There are two chairs and they both sit down on them.

SHAKESPEARE:

Where is he?

JUDITH:

He's gone to the alehouse.

SHAKESPEARE:

"The alehouse"?

JUDITH (nodding):

Yes. He said he wanted to "get drunk" and "forget" his problems. *(She shakes her head in disgust.)* I wish I could forget *mine*.

SHAKESPEARE:

I assume he told you what I - or rather, Mr Collins - discovered.

JUDITH (nodding):

Yes. He told me *everything*.

Finally, she starts to cry.

JUDITH:

Oh, Father, I've been such a *fool!*

SHAKESPEARE:

No, you haven't. You've *been* fooled - there's a world of difference.

JUDITH (shaking her head):

No, there isn't. (*Pause.*) I *knew* what Thomas was like.

SHAKESPEARE stares at her in disbelief.

SHAKESPEARE:

You did?

JUDITH:

Yes. I knew about Margaret - well, I knew there was someone *like* Margaret, even if I didn't know her *name* - and all the other women before her.

SHAKESPEARE looks even more amazed.

SHAKESPEARE:

There were others?

JUDITH:

Well, there were *rumours* there were others - *many* others. But I'd waited so long to get married and I was so desperate to get married - so that I wouldn't die an old maid! - that I ignored them.

She looks up at him, looking as if she will start crying again.

JUDITH:

I thought, "If I *don't* marry Thomas, I'll never marry".

Finally she slumps against him, weeping uncontrollably.

JUDITH:

Now I wish I had never married.

SHAKESPEARE holds her, but does not look down at her: instead, he looks off, in a daze, into the distance.

SCENE TEN (HALLWAY, SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE)

SHAKESPEARE enters and then leans back against the door or wall for support, as if fearful that he might collapse without such support. His wife, ANNE, a woman of about 60, enters and obviously takes him by surprise.

SHAKESPEARE:

Anne!

ANNE:

Why didn't you tell me about Thomas?

SHAKESPEARE looks shocked.

SHAKESPEARE:

You've heard? How?

ANNE:

After you left, Thomas started screaming and cursing, at the top of his voice, and when I went into your study to find out what on earth was going on, he told me everything.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Everything"?

ANNE:

Yes. How he'd only married Judith for her money; how you'd found out about it and cut him out of your will; and how he now hated all of us, especially you.

She stares at SHAKESPEARE, penetratingly.

ANNE:

You should have told me first.

SHAKESPEARE looks surprised, then slowly nods his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

You're right. I should have.

ANNE:

Mind you, I'm not surprised you didn't. You never tell me anything: I always have to hear things *second hand*.

SHAKESPEARE looks even more surprised. There is silence for a moment, until finally he speaks again.

SHAKESPEARE:

Damn him!

ANNE continues to stare at him as he grows increasingly angry.

SHAKESPEARE:

He has ruined Judith's life: he has ruined *all* our lives!

He stops leaning against the door and stands up straight.

SHAKESPEARE:

I hope he goes to *HELL!*

ANNE:

Hypocrite!

SHAKESPEARE looks at her in surprise.

SHAKESPEARE:

What?

ANNE:

You heard me - you're a hypocrite.

SHAKESPEARE:

What do you mean?

ANNE:

At least Thomas only slept with *one* other woman. You slept with *dozens!*

SHAKESPEARE looks confused.

ANNE:

And, like most men, he only did it before he got married. You did it after you were married!

Now SHAKESPEARE looks at her in disbelief.

SHAKESPEARE:

What are you talking about?

ANNE:

You know what I'm talking about.

SHAKESPEARE:

I don't - truly!

ANNE:

I'm talking about all the *whores* you slept with in London.

SHAKESPEARE shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

That's not true.

ANNE:

Don't deny it! I know what happened in London - I *always* knew!

She fixes him with an even more penetrating stare.

ANNE:

Whenever you returned from London - on the *few* occasions that you returned from London - you *never* came near me. (*She laughs, ruefully.*) I used to wonder, "How is it that Will - my *beloved*

Will, who before he left Stratford could never keep his hands off me - now refuses to touch me?" (Once again, she looks at him accusingly.) Then, finally, I realised. He was touching somebody else - anybody else, but me.

SHAKESPEARE looks horrified.

ANNE:

So don't condemn Thomas to an eternity of damnation, or else you condemn yourself!

She turns and walks away quickly, exiting. SHAKESPEARE remains standing there for a moment, then slumps back against the front door or wall again.

SCENE ELEVEN (TAVERN)

A solemn-looking SHAKESPEARE enters a tavern: as he does so, a jowly, moustachioed, middle-aged MAN sitting at a table calls out to him.

MAN:

Will! Over here!

SHAKESPEARE walks over to the table and as he does so THE MAN signals to a passing WAITRESS to bring them two drinks.

SHAKESPEARE:

Hello, Drayton.

MICHAEL DRAYTON stands up, shakes SHAKESPEARE's hand and indicates an empty chair beside him. They both sit down.

DRAYTON:

I'm glad you could come.

SHAKESPEARE:

I'm glad to get out of Stratford. (Pause and grimace.) All the gossip and tittle-tattle is driving me mad!

DRAYTON:

Yes, I heard about your *predicament*, which is why I invited you.

He smiles at SHAKESPEARE warmly.

DRAYTON:

I thought a little *literary* discussion with a fellow poet might take your mind off things, at least for a few hours.

SHAKESPEARE snorts dismissively.

SHAKESPEARE:

Literature is the *last* thing I want to talk about.

DRAYTON:

Why do you say that?

SHAKESPEARE:

Because literature - *writing* - is the reason I'm in this "predicament", as you put it.

DRAYTON:

I don't understand.

SHAKESPEARE:

If I hadn't spent so long in London *writing*, I might have realised that *sweet* Thomas Quiney, who I had known since he was a *boy*, had grown up to become a *liar* and a *blackguard*!

THE WAITRESS brings two large tankards of ale and sets them down carefully on the table, before exiting again: SHAKESPEARE immediately picks one tankard up.

SHAKESPEARE:

So I don't want to talk about "literature"; in fact, I don't want to talk at all. *(He looks appreciatively at his tankard.)*
I just want to drink.

He duly begins to drink: in fact, he downs his ale "in one". Then he sighs loudly, as DRAYTON continues to stare at him.

Suddenly a tall, red-haired, barrel-chested man enters the tavern, calling out as he does so.

MAN:

DRAYTON!

Both DRAYTON and SHAKESPEARE turn round and look at him. He looks at them and smiles, with his hand raised in greeting. In complete contrast, SHAKESPEARE looks horrified to see him and stares at DRAYTON accusingly.

SHAKESPEARE:

Jonson? What's he doing here?]

DRAYTON (with a shrug):

I invited him too.

SHAKESPEARE:

All the way from London?

DRAYTON:

He wrote to me saying that he needed some respite from the *capital* - and from *court* - so I invited him to come and stay with me.

SHAKESPEARE does not look convinced by this explanation. Before he can say anything, however, JONSON has joined them and he greets DRAYTON warmly, shaking his hand.

JONSON:

Michael! It's a pleasure to see you.

DRAYTON:

Hello, Ben. Welcome to Warwickshire!

Then JONSON turns to face SHAKESPEARE and puts out his hand.

JONSON:

And it's a pleasure to see you too, Will.

SHAKESPEARE does not take his hand but looks up at him angrily.

SHAKESPEARE:

What are you doing here, Jonson? *(Pause.)* Have you come to *gloat*?

JONSON looks bewildered.

JONSON:

"Gloat"? About what?

SHAKESPEARE:

My "misfortune".

He continues to look up at JONSON accusingly.

SHAKESPEARE:

I'm sure you've heard about it, even in London. *(Pause.)*
Everyone else has!

Finally JONSON realises what SHAKESPEARE means.

JONSON:

Oh, that! (Quickly, he shakes his head.) I wouldn't gloat about that.

SHAKESPEARE:

Why not? Everyone else is.

He adopts different voices as he "recounts" what has been said.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Will Shakespeare's had his come-uppance." "Serves him right, for getting above his station." "He should never have left home and gone to *London: that's* why his family went to *ruin!*"

JONSON stares down at him intently for a moment, then slowly shakes his head.

JONSON:

No, Will. I would never "gloat" about another man's *misfortune* - especially not *yours.* *(He looks at SHAKESPEARE affectionately.)* We may be "rivals" on stage, but we are *friends* off it. And as your friend, I feel only sorrow and pity for you at this difficult time.

SHAKESPEARE looks surprised, even touched, by this declaration: then, instantaneously, he laughs and tries to dismiss it.

SHAKESPEARE:

Then buy your "friend" a drink. *(Pause.)* God knows he needs it!

JONSON and DRAYTON both laugh. The WAITRESS enters and JONSON signals to her to bring three more tankards of ale. She exits immediately to get them.

SCENE TWELVE (TAVERN)

It is obviously much later - indeed, closing time - as the WAITRESS puts some chairs on tables before exiting, and SHAKESPEARE, JONSON and DRAYTON look completely drunk. With what is obviously a considerable effort, DRAYTON turns to look at SHAKESPEARE.

DRAYTON:

Where's your horse?

SHAKESPEARE *(slurring his words)*:

I didn't bring a horsh.

DRAYTON:

But it's five miles back to Stratford.

SHAKESPEARE:

So? I'll walk! *(Smile.)* I walked here and I'll walk back.

He goes to stand up, but is so drunk that he nearly falls over: both DRAYTON and JONSON put out their arms to hold him upright.

DRAYTON:

Stay with me tonight and walk home in the morning.

JONSON:

Yes. Stay with us, Will. (*He beams at SHAKESPEARE.*) We can continue *drinking* at Drayton's house.

SHAKESPEARE shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

No. I've had enough for one night.

He looks around at the door.

SHAKESPEARE:

Besides, it's a dry night. (*He smiles.*) I shall enjoy a little *stroll!*

And with that, he stands up again and starts walking towards the door.

JONSON (calling after him):

Goodnight, Will.

DRAYTON:

Take care.

SHAKESPEARE turns round to face them and waves to them.

SHAKESPEARE:

Goodnight, good fellows.

Slowly, drunkenly, he exits.

SCENE THIRTEEN (HALLWAY, SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE)

There is a loud knocking at the front door. ANNE enters, goes over to the door and opens it hurriedly. JUDITH is standing there.

ANNE:

Oh, Judith. Thank God you've come.

JUDITH:

I came as soon as I received word you wanted to see me. What is it?

ANNE:

It's your father. He's sick!

JUDITH:

"Sick"?

ANNE:

Yes. Apparently, he went out drinking last night -

JUDITH (interrupting):

Well, if he will insist on drinking so much, the next morning he *will* feel sick.

ANNE (shaking her head, furiously):

No, you don't understand. He has a *fever!*

JUDITH stares at her.

JUDITH:

A fever?

ANNE:

Yes. Oh Judith, he's terribly ill. I've sent for John, but I fear that even a doctor can't help him.

JUDITH:

Let me see him.

They both exit, hurriedly.

SCENE FOURTEEN (SHAKESPEARE'S BEDROOM)

SHAKESPEARE is lying in bed, with his eyes closed and his face covered with sweat. JUDITH and ANNE enter. JUDITH goes to the end of the bed and looks down at SHAKESPEARE.

JUDITH:

Father!

She turns round to look at her mother.

JUDITH:

He looks awful.

ANNE:

I know. I'm afraid the fever has taken hold.

JUDITH looks horrified.

JUDITH:

Really?

ANNE:

Yes. If his spirits had been at their normal, *irrepressible* level, he might have been able to resist it, but - well, everything that's happened recently seems to have *crushed* his spirits.

JUDITH looks even more horrified. Suddenly SHAKESPEARE opens his eyes slightly.

SHAKESPEARE (weakly, even feebly):

I'm so hot.

ANNE:

I know, Will. I know.

She goes over to the table beside the bed, picks up a cloth from a bowl of water and starts mopping his brow. For a moment, there is silence, then -

SHAKESPEARE (even more feebly):

Am I in hell?

ANNE (shaking her head vigorously):

No, of course not. You're not going to hell. You're a good man, Will - a *great* man!

Slowly, and with obvious effort, SHAKESPEARE shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE (quietly, indeed almost inaudibly):

I am not.

He closes his eyes again and ANNE immediately resumes her slow, careful, methodical mopping of his brow. JUDITH lowers her head and begins to cry.

SCENE FIFTEEN (HOLY TRINITY CHURCH IN STRATFORD)

HEMINGS and CONDELL enter, leading TWO OTHER PALLBEARERS as they all carry Shakespeare's coffin into the church and set it down on two wooden stands in the middle of the stage. They check that it is secure on the stands, then HEMINGS AND CONDELL go and kneel down (stage right) while the TWO OTHER PALLBEARERS walk to the back of the church and eventually exit. HEMINGS and CONDELL remain kneeling for a moment, in silence, and when they speak they do so quietly, as they are in church.

HEMINGS:

Apparently, he will be buried directly in front of the altar.

CONDELL:

That's appropriate.

HEMINGS:

How so?

CONDELL:

Well, he always enjoyed being centre-stage.

HEMINGS smiles. There is another pause. Then -

HEMINGS:

I still can't believe it.

CONDELL:

I know. I can't either. Less than two months ago, we were sitting here celebrating his daughter's wedding!

HEMINGS nods and again there is silence for a moment.

HEMINGS:

It's not right.

CONDELL:

What isn't?

HEMINGS:

The cause of death! Will survived fire, ice, plague, even becoming involved in a plot against the Queen, and then - finally! - a fever finishes him off.

CONDELL:

I know. 'Tis not a fitting end.

They bow their heads.

EPILOGUE

SCENE ONE (BACKSTAGE OFFICE AT THE GLOBE THEATRE)

CONDELL is sitting at the desk, counting money as always, while HEMINGS stands over him and stares at the ring on his left little finger, next to his wedding ring, which has a skull or death's head on it.

HEMINGS:

I still can't get used to wearing a mourning ring.

CONDELL glances at an identical ring on his left little finger, then resumes counting.

HEMINGS:

I've been wearing it for months now, but it still makes me shudder every time I look at it.

Once again, he looks down at CONDELL, who does not look up.

HEMINGS:

It doesn't even fit! Last week, when I tried to hail a fellow in the street - (He quickly raises his left hand to indicate "hailing a fellow".) It nearly flew off!

Finally CONDELL looks up at him.

HEMINGS:

If I had lost it, I'd have nothing to remember Will by!

CONDELL holds up a piece of paper to show HEMINGS.

CONDELL:

Here is a list of the props we need. *(He pushes a few coins across the desk towards HEMINGS.)* And here is the money to buy them. *(Then he looks up at HEMINGS angrily.)* So would you please stop complaining about *wills* and *rings* - and *Will's rings!* - long enough to do some *work*? After all, we still have a *theatre* to run!

HEMINGS (equally angrily):

Yes, Henry! Of course, Henry! Forgive me for still being in *mourning*, Henry!

HEMINGS angrily snatches the piece of paper from CONDELL, picks up the coins and goes out.

SCENE TWO (LONDON STREET)

HEMINGS enters, carrying a leather bag out of which a single peacock feather is poking. Ahead of him there is a bookstall, attended to by a BOOKSELLER. HEMINGS glances at the stall as he walks past it. Then, suddenly, he stops, turns round and stares at the stall, which only seems to have copies of one large, leather-bound book on top of it. He walks towards the stall and stands directly in front of it. THE BOOKSELLER smiles at him.

BOOKSELLER:

Good day, Sir. How can I help you?

HEMINGS indicates the books, or rather book, on the stall.

HEMINGS:

I would like to see a copy of Ben Jonson's *Workes*, please.

BOOKSELLER:

Excellent choice, Sir. Allow me to show you one.

THE BOOKSELLER picks up a copy, nearly dropping it as it is so heavy.

BOOKSELLER:

It's only just been published.

HEMINGS:

Really?

BOOKSELLER:

Oh, yes. And as it says on the magnificent frontispiece - (*He indicates the leather cover*) it contains *all* his plays, from *The Alchemist* to *Volpone*.

HEMINGS gently touches the front cover - indeed, he almost caresses it.

BOOKSELLER:

It is a remarkable book - historic even.

HEMINGS:

How so?

BOOKSELLER:

It is the first collection of plays by an English playwright.

He leans forward to speak to HEMINGS more intimately.

BOOKSELLER:

Did you know, Sir, that - incredible as it sounds! - there is no law of ownership, or possession, for playwrights?

HEMINGS (feigning ignorance):

Is that so?

BOOKSELLER:

It is. That's why most playwrights never publish their plays, because if they did, every other theatrical company in London would simply buy a copy and put on a production of their own.

HEMINGS:

Really? How remarkable!

BOOKSELLER:

The only copies of plays that were ever printed were unauthorised copies that were printed without the consent of their authors.

He laughs.

BOOKSELLER:

Apparently, some printers resorted to *bribing* individual actors to regurgitate what they could remember of a play.

HEMINGS:

I imagine such copies must have been of poor quality.

BOOKSELLER:

They were terrible! They always read as if someone had reconstructed the play from memory - and in the process, forgotten half the lines. Which is exactly what happened!

He laughs again.

BOOKSELLER:

That's why Mister Jonson was so anxious to publish his own plays himself - to preserve them for posterity, in all their glory. And I think you'll agree that he's done a fine job.

HEMINGS:

He has.

BOOKSELLER:

His collection of plays confirms his reputation as the pre-eminent English playwright.

HEMINGS:

"Pre-eminent"?

BOOKSELLER:

Indeed.

HEMINGS:

But what about Shakespeare?

BOOKSELLER:

Who?

HEMINGS:

William Shakespeare.

BOOKSELLER:

Oh! *Him!*

THE BOOKSELLER laughs again.

BOOKSELLER:

He hardly ranks alongside Mister Johnson. Granted, he had a certain populist touch that allowed him to entertain the masses, but he lacked Mister Jonson's rigorous classicism.

HEMINGS looks as if he might explode, but restrains himself.

HEMINGS:

Do you have any of *his* plays?

BOOKSELLER:

Who? *Shakespeare*?

HEMINGS:

Yes.

BOOKSELLER:

I may have something but, as I've explained, it almost certainly won't be of high quality.

HEMINGS:

That's alright. I'd still like to see it.

THE BOOKSELLER looks surprised, then ducks down under his stall.

BOOKSELLER:

Aha! I knew I had something.

HEMINGS:

What is it?

THE BOOKSELLER stands up, clutching something close to his chest, so that it cannot be seen.

BOOKSELLER:

THIS!

Looking pleased with himself, he proudly holds out a grubby, torn play-script that HEMINGS looks at in horror.

HEMINGS:

Oh my God!

SCENE THREE (BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE)

CONDELL is still counting money when the door is opened, quietly. HEMINGS enters as quietly as he can, holding a copy of Jonson's Workes, and then tip-toes over to the desk, so as not to alert CONDELL to his presence. Once he reaches the desk, he stands over CONDELL (who continues to stare down at the money he is counting) and lifts the heavy, leather-bound book aloft. He waits for a moment, then lets it fall with a CRASH, startling CONDELL, who almost falls off his chair in shock.

CONDELL:

OH MY GOD!

HEMINGS laughs.

CONDELL:

What on earth are you doing - creeping up behind me like an assassin, and then dropping a bomb on my desk?

HEMINGS:

It's not a bomb.

CONDELL:

It might as well have been, given the damage it's caused.

HEMINGS:

It's a book.

CONDELL:

A book?

HEMINGS:

Yes.

CONDELL:

Why are you throwing books around?

HEMINGS:

Read the front cover - or should I say, "The magnificent leather frontispiece"? - and you'll see why.

CONDELL looks down at the book (turning it over, if necessary) to read the front cover.

CONDELL:

"The Workes of Benjamin Jonson."

Like HEMINGS before him, he now stares at the book in disbelief.

HEMINGS:

Big, isn't it?

CONDELL:

Enormous.

HEMINGS:

I suppose it has to be, to accommodate all of Jonson's plays - *and* his massive sense of self-worth!

CONDELL laughs, then finally looks up at HEMINGS again.

HEMINGS:

Apparently, it confirms his reputation as the "pre-eminent English playwright".

CONDELL:

What?

HEMINGS:

That's how he's being described.

CONDELL:

But Will was an *infinitely* better writer.

HEMINGS:

I know that; we *both* know that; anyone who's ever seen a Jonson play knows that! But will future generations?

CONDELL does not answer, but simply stares at HEMINGS.

HEMINGS:

By contrast with Jonson's *Workes*, *this* is what will remain of Shakespeare.

He takes out from a pocket the slim, torn, grubby play-script that the Bookseller had shown him: he holds it aloft with both hands, then lets it fall gently - indeed, it almost floats down, as it is so light - on to CONDELL's desk. Once it has landed, CONDELL stares down at it.

CONDELL (reading):

"The Tragical Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, by William Shakespeare".

HEMINGS:

At the stall where I bought Jonson's book, that was all they had of Will's work.

CONDELL continues to stare down at the play-script.

HEMINGS:

Read it.

CONDELL:

What?

HEMINGS:

I have. In fact, allow me to read it to you, or at least some prize extracts.

He picks up the script, flicks through it and begins reading - quoting - from it.

HEMINGS:

"O, that this too, too sullied flesh should melt."

CONDELL winces and HEMINGS flicks ahead to another page.

HEMINGS:

"The play's the thing,
Wherein we'll catch the King *and* Queen."

Once again, CONDELL winces and once again HEMINGS flicks ahead.

HEMINGS:

And best - or rather, *worst* - of all:

"To be or not to be, aye, there's the *POINT!*"

He closes the script and looks down at CONDELL in disgust.

HEMINGS:

If they can't get *that* right, they won't get *anything* right!

He tosses the script down on the desk.

HEMINGS:

I can't bear it. After all we went through together - building The Globe, rebuilding it after it burned down, surviving the plot against the Queen, *this* - (*He points at the script*) - And *trash* like it, is all that will survive of "Shakespeare"!

He stops looking at the script and looks at CONDELL.

HEMINGS:

That's why we have to print the plays ourselves.

CONDELL:

What?

HEMINGS:

Why not? If Jonson can print all of *his* plays, why can't we print all of Will's?

CONDELL:

Because we don't even have *copies* of some of Will's plays, especially the early ones.

HEMINGS:

WHAT? Why not?

CONDELL:

They must have been destroyed in the fire, or just lost over time, most likely when we moved theatres. As for the plays we *do* have copies of, most of them are just old prompt-books.

HEMINGS:

So?

CONDELL:

So they've been scribbled on and scribbled on by successive book-holders or prompters until they're virtually illegible!

HEMINGS:

"Illegible"?

CONDELL:

Aye. Will himself could decipher them, but we can't, at least not easily. While he was still alive, it didn't matter: if we had any problems with a play, especially an old one, we could just ask him, even if we had to wait until he visited London. But now - well, we *can't* ask him.

HEMINGS:

I'm sure that, given time, we could "decipher" these prompt-books and prepare them for publication.

CONDELL:

Are you joking?

HEMINGS:

No! Of course not.

CONDELL:

It would take an *age - years*, at least - especially when we've still got a theatre to run.

HEMINGS:

So? What are a few years compared with immortality?

CONDELL:

Whose immortality? His, or ours?

HEMINGS looks upset, even offended.

HEMINGS:

Why, his of course.

CONDELL sighs.

CONDELL:

The truth is that over the years we've probably paid more attention to preserving the company's props and costumes than we have Will's plays. Now the best that we can do is to print those plays that we have fair copies of, which is about half of them.

HEMINGS:

"Half"?

CONDELL:

That's still about twenty or so.

HEMINGS:

It's not enough! Half a Shakespeare is no Shakespeare at all - half a Shakespeare is a Jonson, or a Marlowe, at best! *(Pause.)* We have to show the *whole* man, to show what *one* man is capable of. And in doing so, we'll show what *mankind* is capable of!

Suddenly he thumps the desk, sending even more coins flying.

HEMINGS:

We have to do it.

CONDELL:

Do what?

HEMINGS:

Print the plays - all the plays, with all the right words.

CONDELL:

Are you mad? I've just told you: we don't even have copies of some of the plays.

HEMINGS:

Then we'll find them! They must exist somewhere.

CONDELL:

And where exactly do you propose looking for them?

HEMINGS:

EVERYWHERE!

CONDELL:

"Everywhere"?

HEMINGS suddenly starts pacing up and down the floor excitedly, gathering pace and even kicking coins aside as he gathers ideas.

HEMINGS:

Everywhere he ever lived; everywhere he ever worked; and most importantly, everywhere he ever drank and laid his head - or any other part of his anatomy!

HEMINGS laughs, but CONDELL just continues to stare at him.

HEMINGS:

Then, when we've found the missing plays, we'll check all the plays to make sure that nothing has been added or omitted.

CONDELL:

And how do you propose doing that?

HEMINGS:

By gathering together all the actors who ever appeared in a Shakespeare play over the last twenty years, or at least those who are still alive, and going through their parts with them, line by line, to make sure that they're correct. Some of the actors would also have been employed as book-holders or prompters, so we can get them to go through the prompt-books to decipher all the notes and stage directions and *scribblings* that they added over the years.

HEMINGS suddenly stops pacing up and own and stares at CONDELL.

HEMINGS:

And of course, there is one actor who knows the plays, or at least the title roles, almost as well as Will himself. *(He smiles.)* After all, Burbage always thought that they were really *his* plays, not Will's!

CONDELL laughs.

CONDELL:

Typical actor.

HEMINGS:

Finally, we just have to find someone to write a dedication. And who better than England's greatest *living* playwright?

CONDELL looks at him questioningly.

SCENE FOUR (A SHOP)

CONDELL sits at another desk (one not laden with coins) and HEMINGS leans over him to read a page laid out on the desk, while BEN JONSON watches them both. Finally, HEMINGS and CONDELL both finish reading and look up at JONSON.

HEMINGS:

It's wonderful, Ben.

CONDELL:

Yes, especially the line, "He was not of an age, but for all time".

JONSON smiles ruefully.

JONSON:

I suspect it's what I'll be best remembered for.

HEMINGS and CONDELL laugh, and JONSON stares at them.

JONSON:

I ought to have written a dedication in honour of you two.

HEMINGS:

What do you mean?

JONSON:

Well, Will may have written the plays, but you're the ones who found them, edited them and prepared them for publication.

HEMINGS:

It wasn't *that* difficult.

CONDELL:

Not once we'd got started.

JONSON stares at them in disbelief.

JONSON:

Gentlemen, you *amaze* me.

HEMINGS:

How so?

JONSON:

You make light of what you've done, but the truth is that most men wouldn't spend so much time, money and effort publishing their own plays, let alone someone else's! *(Pause.)* I can't imagine that anyone would do it for *me*. *(Pause.)* So why did you do it for Will?

HEMINGS and CONDELL exchange a glance, then look back at JOHNSON.

HEMINGS:

Before we met Will, we were part-time actors, struggling to make a living.

CONDELL:

Now, we are part-owners of the greatest theatre company in England.

HEMINGS:

Nay, the *world!*

JOHNSON laughs.

HEMINGS:

He did so much for us.

CONDELL:

This was the least we could do for him.

JOHNSON nods in acknowledgement: as he does so, a PRINTER in an ink-stained apron enters, carefully carrying a single page.

PRINTER (to HEMINGS AND CONDELL):

The title-page is ready, gentlemen. Would you like to see it?

HEMINGS:

Of course.

CONDELL:

We don't want to leave anything to chance - not now.

THE PRINTER puts the piece of paper down on the desk.

HEMINGS (reading aloud):

*"Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies,
Published according to the true original copies."*

CONDELL:

There's no need to read it aloud!

HEMINGS:

No. Sorry.

They both continue reading, then CONDELL looks up at THE PRINTER.

CONDELL:

You forgot the date.

PRINTER:

Today's date?

CONDELL:

No. Just the year - 1623.

PRINTER:

Oh. Sorry. I'll add it right now.

He carefully picks up the title page again and exits with it.

HEMINGS:

Seven years, from start to finish.

CONDELL:

I know. I could hardly forget!

HEMINGS:

Still, what are a few years - even seven - compared with immortality?

CONDELL:

Nothing at all, John. Nothing at all.

They look at each other and smile.

Slowly, the lights come down.

- END -