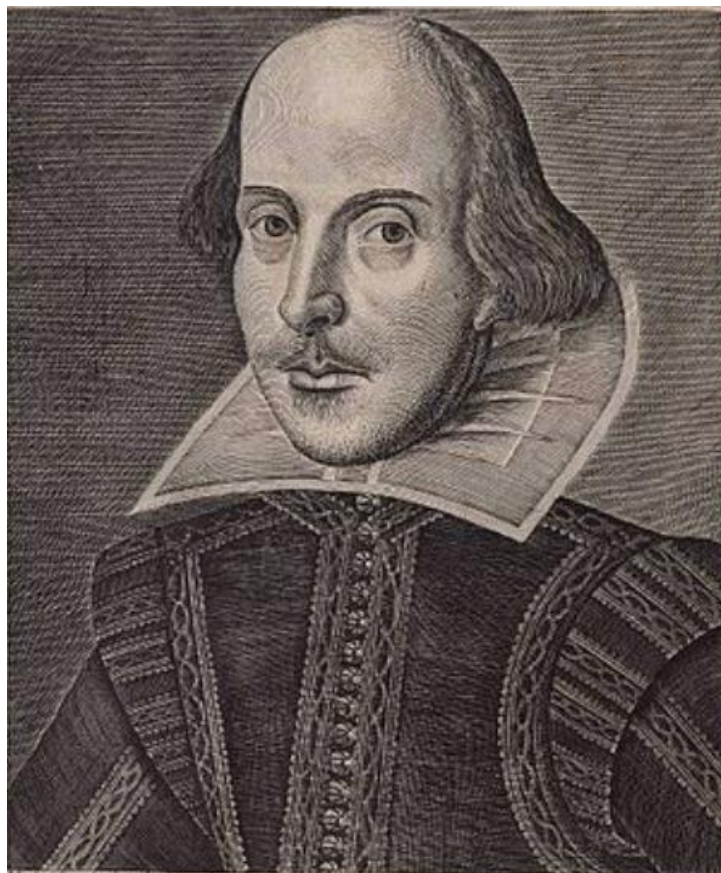


SHAKESPEARE

A Play by Martin Keady

*Being the Remarkable True Comedy, History
and Tragedy of Shakespeare*



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For H & C.

SHAKESPEARE takes place over many 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 (28 at the start). AND First Soldier who arrests Essex; 2nd Court Official.

SECOND ACTOR: to play Henry Condell (18 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 (27 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

Ideally, the start of each Part of **SHAKESPEARE** (e.g. "Prologue - 1594") will be announced or otherwise communicated to the audience. In "Part I (Comedy)", 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 "Part II (History)", during the performance of *Richard the Second*, the action at The Globe theatre switches between the wings (or side of the stage) and the stage itself. Throughout this action, the wings (or side of the stage) and the stage will be lit alternately, to indicate where the action is taking place, or any other suitable means of highlighting the wings (or side of the stage) and the stage alternately can be used. Again, whatever works!

PROLOGUE - 1594

JOHN HEMINGS (28 & portly) & HENRY CONDELL (18 & thin) enter in torn clothes and looking exhausted. A RED-HAIRED MAN wearing very fine clothes enters from the other side of the stage.

HEMINGS:

Burbage! What are you doing here?

RICHARD BURBAGE (aged 27) declaims like the great actor he is.

BURBAGE (to HEMINGS):

John! How are you, you old rogue? I was just having breakfast with your charming wife, when I saw you approaching. (*He looks them over.*) What's happened to you both? You look dreadful!

HEMINGS:

We had to walk back to London from Kent, after our tour was rudely interrupted.

BURBAGE:

How so?

HEMINGS:

Mid-performance, a mob - no other word will do - armed with axes, clubs and pitchforks, who were convinced that we had brought plague to their village, drove us out.

CONDELL (to Burbage):

We had to run for our lives - literally.

BURBAGE:

Philistines! England is full of Philistines.

HEMINGS looks the exquisitely attired BURBAGE up and down.

HEMINGS:

By the looks of it, you haven't had to take to the road.

BURBAGE:

I spent enough time "on tour" when I was younger. I couldn't withstand it now.

HEMINGS:

Neither can I.

BURBAGE:

Well, you won't have to - not anymore.

HEMINGS:

What do you mean?

BURBAGE:

I have news.

HEMINGS:

What news?

BURBAGE:

Strange news of Lord Strange!

HEMINGS:

For God's sake, don't mention that name!

BURBAGE:

What? Why not?

HEMINGS:

Because, having abandoned all his *props, musical instruments* and most importantly *horses*, when we had to run for our *lives*, we'll be in his debt forever.

BURBAGE:

Oh no, you won't.

HEMINGS:

Why not? Has he suddenly acquired a *forgiving* nature?

BURBAGE:

No, he has suddenly *died!*

HEMINGS:

WHAT?!

BURBAGE:

The plague that closed his *theatre*, and every *other* theatre in London, has now "closed" *him* too - permanently!

HEMINGS:

Well, that confirms it.

BURBAGE:

Confirms what?

HEMINGS:

My retirement from the stage! I've been considering it for a while, but now it's confirmed. Without Lord Strange, there'll be no more Lord Strange's Men!

BURBAGE:

But you don't understand. A new company has been formed from the remnants of Lord Strange's Men.

HEMINGS:

A new company?

BURBAGE:

Yes, "the Lord Chamberlain's Men", under the patronage of Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain himself, the man in charge of court *revels*!

HEMINGS:

WHAT?!

BURBAGE:

So, in addition to performing for the masses, the new company will perform regularly at *court* - even, on special occasions, for the *Queen* herself!

HEMINGS:

I don't believe it.

BURBAGE:

You can believe *me*! I've been put in charge of hiring men for the new company.

HEMINGS:

Really?

BURBAGE:

Yes. That's why I'm here. I can't think of a finer *company manager* than you, John.

CONDELL:

Might there be room in the new company for *me*, Mister Burbage?

BURBAGE:

Of course, Henry. There's room enough for the Master - (*He indicates HEMINGS*) - and the apprentice (*He indicates CONDELL*).

CONDELL:

Thank you, Mister Burbage. That's a *great relief*.

HEMINGS:

Who else have you hired?

BURBAGE:

I have some actors from the Lord Admiral's Men. And we have a *writer*, so we can perform *new plays*.

HEMINGS:

Who is he?

BURBAGE:

Name of Shakespeare.

HEMINGS:

"Shakespeare"? (*Pause.*) Who's he?

CONDELL:

He wrote *Titus Andronicus*.

HEMINGS:

Any good?

CONDELL (with a shrug):

It was full of blood.

HEMINGS:

Well, you've got to give the audience what they want!

BURBAGE:

Shakespeare's no Marlowe, but he's not bad.

HEMINGS (bowing his head):

There'll *never* be another Marlowe.

BURBAGE (also bowing his head):

No, there won't.

HEMINGS:

Poor Kit, God rest his soul. He may have been a *Satanist* -

BURBAGE:

And a *Sodomite* -

HEMINGS:

But he could *write* like an angel.

They all bow their heads, in remembrance of Marlowe.

BURBAGE:

Anyway, the most important thing is that we'll have proper patronage and a steady income.

HEMINGS:

No more road?

BURBAGE:

No more road.

*Slowly the lights come down until there is complete **BLACK**.*

PART I (THE EXTRAORDINARY TRUE COMEDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE) -
1598. ACT ONE, SCENE ONE (THE DRESSING ROOM IN A THEATRE)

APPLAUSE is heard off-stage as HEMINGS and CONDELL, wearing helmets after playing Soldiers on stage, wait in the dressing-room: HEMINGS to collect costumes from THE OTHER ACTORS as they come off-stage; CONDELL to count money and record it in a ledger.

HEMINGS:

How does he do it? I mean - *how?* Every time - every time!

CONDELL:

There's no point asking *how* he does it: I doubt he knows himself. Just be grateful *that* he does it.

HEMINGS:

Oh, I am. I am.

ANOTHER ACTOR, DRESSED AS A LORD, enters the dressing room, but HEMINGS puts out an arm to stop him going any further.

HEMINGS:

Costume, please!

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

Oh, come on, Mister Hemings.

He indicates a table opposite that is laden with wine bottles.

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

Can't I have a drink first?

HEMINGS:

No!

ACTOR DRESSED AS A LORD:

Why not?

HEMINGS:

Because, like every 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:

Oh, 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's been playing FALSTAFF, enters and removes the cushion that has served as his "stomach". He is accompanied by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, who is only about 34 but already balding. 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 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 watch as it seems he will drink the bottle in one, so they do not notice an OLD MAN dressed 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! *(Pause.)* 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 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.

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, and BURBAGE 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 and 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!

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.

CONDELL:

Perhaps the Lord Chamberlain could help us.

BURBAGE:

No. The *old* Lord Chamberlain might have helped us, but the *new* Lord Chamberlain - his son - has no interest in theatre. He prefers hosting feasts to staging plays, so he'd never help us.

HEMINGS looks out of the window.

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

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 presume.

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!

THE ACTORS 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 go inside the theatre, exiting.

SCENE FOUR (THE STREET OUTSIDE THE THEATRE)

The sound of banging, hammering & sawing is heard off-stage. It continues as CONDELL and SHAKESPEARE enter, & when they speak, they have to shout to make themselves heard above the din.

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. As he does so, 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 away slowly - very slowly.

SHAKESPEARE (to HEMINGS):

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

HEMINGS:

Stop complaining and enjoy the ride.

SHAKESPEARE looks even more miserable. HEMINGS whips the horse forward and it moves forward, slowly - 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: as he does so, HEMINGS points directly in front of him.

HEMINGS:

There it is.

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, while SHAKESPEARE takes in the scene before him.

SHAKESPEARE:

There are so many people on the ice.

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

SHAKESPEARE:

They're walking...or sledging...or skating! *(He looks round at HEMINGS, nervously.)* 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. But not *horses* - and certainly not horses pulling carts laden with *timber!* *(He looks away, looking further along the river.)* Why don't we just use the *real* bridge: London Bridge?

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 and across the river before Allen returns from his holiday. *(He looks directly in front of him.)* This is the *only* way.

SHAKESPEARE also looks directly ahead - nervously.

SHAKESPEARE:

Alright. Proceed.

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

HEMINGS (calling out):

GO ON!

The horse puts one foot forward into the air, then carefully puts it 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. As it does so, SHAKESPEARE leans out of the cart and looks down.

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.

SHAKESPEARE sits bolt upright.

SHAKESPEARE:

Stay away from the stalls selling hot food!

HEMINGS:

Don't worry: I will!

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.) 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. HEMINGS smiles back. Then he 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 distinctly unimpressed.

HEMINGS:

I know it's not much now, but one day it will be the finest theatre in London. Or as Burbage would say: *(He imitates Burbage declaiming, loudly and gruffly.)* "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:

It's very kind of you to say so, John, 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 Swan 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 or wooden rivet. He stands up again and holds it aloft.

ALLEN (screaming):

CONSTABLE!!!!

The lights come down instantly.

PART II (THE REMARKABLE TRUE HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE): 1601.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE (BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE are in the backstage office of the new Globe theatre: SHAKESPEARE sits at a desk, quill in hand, writing; HEMINGS checks costumes; CONDELL also sits at the desk, counting money; and BURBAGE paces up and down.

BURBAGE:

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

He hesitates, as he obviously tries to remember the next word.

HEMINGS (without looking round):

"Everything."

BURBAGE:

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

He resumes pacing in silence, or at least mutters so quietly that it is inaudible. As he does so, A SHEPHERD (or rather an Actor playing a Shepherd, complete with 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?

The SHEPHERD laughs, then shakes his head.

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.

HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE instantly stop what they are doing.

HEMINGS (to SHAKESPEARE):

Your old 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:

"On the stage"?

SHEPHERD:

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

The SHEPHERD exits.

HEMINGS (to SHAKESPEARE):

D'you want us to come with you?

SHAKESPEARE:

No. I'd better see him on my own. He's *my* cross to bear, not yours.

HEMINGS:

Well, be careful. You know what he's like: he'll demand the world!

SHAKESPEARE:

He always does. And, as always, I shall have to provide it.

He gets up from his desk and exits.

SCENE TWO (THE STAGE, THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE walks onto stage & sees SOUTHAMPTON (handsome, finely dressed & 30) standing at the front of it, looking out.

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.*) 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 surprised.

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:

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.

For a moment, SOUTHAMPTON looks upset - even offended.

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. 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:

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:

I do. 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 stares at him in amazement.

SHAKESPEARE:

That's impossible, my lord. As I just explained, 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.

Obviously trying to remain calm, SHAKESPEARE breathes deeply.

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:

No! It must be *Richard*. (*He stares at SHAKESPEARE.*) Don't you see, Will? It's *about* Essex!

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. (*Pause.*) That is why we want to honour the Earl. By staging *Richard* in front of an audience of veterans -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting, in alarm):

"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:

To do what, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

For a moment, SHAKESPEARE just looks absolutely astonished.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

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 might find myself stretched out upon the *rack*.

SOUTHAMPTON:

And if you do *not* stage it, you might 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:

Ten years ago, when you were struggling to make a living in plague-ridden playhouses, I gave you shelter. Later, I commissioned your *Sonnets* -

SHAKESPEARE *(interrupting)*:

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

SOUTHAMPTON:

Don't quibble, Will! Later still, I 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:

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, obviously trying to be conciliatory, lowers his voice.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

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, obviously trying to buy himself some time while considering what to do.

SHAKESPEARE:

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:

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 grave.

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 long, deep breath, before replying.

SHAKESPEARE:

Then I will do my best to arrange it.

SOUTHAMPTON (excitedly):

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:

I will do it. Happily! *(Smiling broadly, he looks around The Globe once more.)* 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 stand in front of him, looking at him in disbelief.

BURBAGE:

Did Southampton leave his *mind* in Ireland? We can't perform *Richard the Second*. 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. *(Pause.)* 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 round at BURBAGE and HEMINGS*) - could find the money to repay him.

BURBAGE:

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. (*Pause.*) 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, struggling to make a living on the highways and byways of England -

CONDELL:

Nearly getting *killed* in the process.

HEMINGS:

Exactly! Instead, I am a *part-owner* of the greatest theatre in England - (*again, imitating BURBAGE*) "Nay, the world!"

SHAKESPEARE smiles and HEMINGS stares at him.

HEMINGS:

I owe you *everything*, Will - my career, my fortune, *everything*!
(*He looks around 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. *That's* why we'll help you to discharge your debt to Southampton, once and for all, so you can finally rid yourself of his *demonic* influence.

SHAKESPEARE looks around 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 get away with it.

They all look round at each other nervously.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE (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 up above for himself and his retinue. *(Even more applause, off-stage.)* He's obviously recognised some "old friends" in the audience.

HEMINGS:

They're not "old friends": they fought under him in Ireland. They serve him - just as we do. *(A trumpet sounds to announce the start of the performance.)* We are summoned.

HEMINGS and SHAKESPEARE walk on stage to the sound of applause.

SCENE TWO (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*."

There is a pause, then 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 serve!

SHAKESPEARE & HEMINGS look startled, before SHAKESPEARE resumes.

SHAKESPEARE (as John of Gaunt):

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

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

SHAKESPEARE and HEMINGS are once again at the side of the stage, watching the action taking place on stage: when they speak to each other, they do so quietly, so as not to be heard on stage.

SHAKESPEARE:

This is it - the deposition scene.

HEMINGS:

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

SHAKESPEARE looks at him fearfully, but HEMINGS just watches the action on stage, so SHAKESPEARE does, too. As they watch, BURBAGE (playing King Richard, complete with crown) & AUGUSTINE PHILIPS (another actor playing the rebel, Bolingbroke) enter. They approach each other, stop centre-stage and stare at each other. Finally, BURBAGE removes the crown.

BURBAGE (as King Richard):

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

At the side of the stage, HEMINGS whispers to SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

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

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) now 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 for a moment, then loud applause, followed by a series of even louder 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 at the side of the stage, looks alarmed. He and HEMINGS are joined by CONDELL and BURBAGE, and they all look confused as THE AUDIENCE continue cheering (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 walks across the stage to the side of the stage where the ACTORS are gathered: as he reaches them, they all bow.

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 he takes hold of it and retreats.

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 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, fearfully.

ACT THREE, SCENE ONE (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:

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. So, 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 TWO (ESSEX'S COURTYARD)

ESSEX and SOUTHAMPTON re-enter and there is a huge cheer (off-stage): ESSEX puts up a hand and the cheering 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, smile triumphantly and exit.

SCENE THREE (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.)* 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 and smiles.*) Come - join us.

THE SHERIFF looks even more surprised, 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 to his men.*) CHARGE!

The SHERIFF draws his sword and calls out in the other direction.

SHERIFF:

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

ESSEX marches forward to confront THE SHERIFF & the two men fight, their swords clashing loudly. 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 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 looks off-stage, the sound (off-stage) of his Men running away, and their weapons being discarded with a succession of loud bangs and clangs, 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.

SHERIFF:

That's it, you scoundrels! Run for your lives!

SCENE FOUR (THE EARL OF ESSEX'S STUDY)

ESSEX & SOUTHAMPTON re-enter, panting for breath, having run upstairs to Essex's study. They assemble a makeshift barricade in Essex's study, by piling up a chair & other furniture against the door. They stand back, to see if the barricade will hold, but TWO SOLDIERS enter and start battering away at it. Seeing that it is about to be broken down, 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 SOLDIERS enter.

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 disbelief.

ESSEX:

TURNCOAT!

ESSEX thrusts his sword at SOUTHAMPTON, who narrowly evades it. He 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 FIVE (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.

They all look at him in horror.

ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE (THE STAGE OF THE GLOBE THEATRE)

SHAKESPEARE, BURBAGE, HEMINGS & CONDELL stand, while BRYANT, a younger actor, sits on the stage. SHAKESPEARE addresses the AUDIENCE as if they were THE OTHER 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 offstage.

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. And that's it! I don't know what else to 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*) 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.*) 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 - 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.

HEMINGS, SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE all stare at him.

HEMINGS:

That's a good idea, Henry. For once, we might just *profit* from their prejudice.

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 (*he indicates the AUDIENCE*) 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 (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 as he exits: they watch him go, then HEMINGS addresses the PLAYERS/AUDIENCE.

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 THE OTHERS (except SHAKESPEARE):

AYE!

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

SHAKESPEARE:

Gentlemen, once again, I don't know what to say. (Pause.) Except "thank you".

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 look at him in horror.

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 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, at the back of the PLAYERS/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. (*He looks at PHILIPS and sees that he still looks frightened.*) 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 TWO (COURTROOM)

A fearful-looking PHILIPS stands before THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE, who is bewigged, seated 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 & PHILIPS smiles uneasily.)* Alright, Mister Philips. At the moment, there is no 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 with a note he gives to the LORD CHIEF JUSTICE. THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE reads it, 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):

I thought you might be surprised.

SCENE THREE (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 total 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, just as we performed for the rebels, and then we will be *killed* - just like the rebels.

ALL THE OTHER PLAYERS stare at him in horror.

ACT FIVE, SCENE ONE (BACKSTAGE/"DRESSING ROOM" AT THE PALACE)

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS & CONDELL, in costume for Richard the Second, wait backstage and peer 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 & PHILIPS enter, also in costume: SHAKESPEARE addresses them & the AUDIENCE, who again represent ALL THE OTHER PLAYERS.

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 (interrupting):

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 herself. That's something a mere grocer-

CONDELL:

Or fishmonger.

HEMINGS:

Could only dream of.

SHAKESPEARE smiles.

HEMINGS:

Take your positions, men.

THE ACTORS all stand to attention and HEMINGS addresses them all and THE AUDIENCE/OTHER PLAYERS.

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 laughs.

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 TWO (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 THREE (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 immediately composes himself again.

SCENE FOUR (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 FIVE (BACKSTAGE/"DRESSING ROOM" AT COURT)

SHAKESPEARE waits backstage: the coffin is carried off stage and BURBAGE 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 back at BURBAGE, again in disbelief.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

NOW BURBAGE looks at SHAKESPEARE in absolute astonishment.

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. Other hands join in, 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 SIX (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; 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.)* I am Richard the Second. Know ye not that?

SHAKESPEARE looks stunned.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, your Majesty. I did not know that.

QUEEN:

Well, I am.

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 SEVEN (BACKSTAGE/"DRESSING ROOM" AT COURT)

SHAKESPEARE enters & THE OTHER ACTORS 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 THE OTHER ACTORS all stare at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

What did she mean?

SHAKESPEARE:

I don't know. And I certainly wasn't going to ask! *(He sighs, in exhaustion and relief.)* 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 their props & costumes, then exit.

SCENE EIGHT (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 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, before 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.

BURBAGE, HEMINGS and CONDELL all stare at SHAKESPEARE, then SHAKESPEARE walks on silently and they all follow him, exiting.

There is a moment's pause, then the HANGMAN re-enters: he walks to the front of the stage and addresses the audience directly.

HANGMAN:

Tomorrow, I will hang the Earl of Essex, but Southampton will appeal to the Queen for mercy and she will commute his sentence to life imprisonment - in the Tower. *(Pause.)* Elizabeth will die two years from now, in 1603, and will be succeeded by her distant cousin, King James the Sixth of Scotland, who will become King James the First of England. *(Pause.)* King James will become such an admirer of Shakespeare that eventually he will become the patron of the company, finally giving them a degree of financial security. *(Pause.)* And over the next ten years, while he is a member of "The King's Men", Shakespeare will write many of his greatest plays, including the four great tragedies - *Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth* and *Othello* - all of which feature a plot against a monarch or another leader that is led by someone close to them who they mistakenly trust.

The HANGMAN exits, following The Players offstage.

Slowly the lights come down.

And if there is an interval, it comes here.

PART III (THE MOST LAMENTABLE TRAGEDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE):
1616. ACT ONE, SCENE ONE (SHAKESPEARE'S STUDY, STRATFORD.)

SHAKESPEARE, 51 and almost totally bald, stands in his study dictating to his lawyer, FRANCIS COLLINS, a small, bespectacled man also in his 50s, who is 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.

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.*) 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 regard.

SHAKESPEARE corrects the date and hands the quill back to COLLINS: COLLINS checks the will and finally 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 (smiling):

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.*) That's one thing done.

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

SHAKESPEARE, wearing his finest, most expensive clothes, is sitting at the head of the dining table for the wedding feast. The bride and groom - JUDITH (a rather plain-looking woman of 30 who wears a beautiful white dress) and THOMAS (a handsome man of about 27) - sit either side of him. Next to them are HEMINGS and CONDELL (now 58 & 36 respectively), who, like everyone else, are in their finery. Beside HEMINGS is the Groom's father, RICHARD QUINEY, a handsome man who, like Shakespeare himself, is in his early 50s. HEMINGS & CONDELL bang the table and chant.

HEMINGS AND CONDELL (together):

SPEECH! SPEECH!

SHAKESPEARE (smiling):

Alright, you rowdy lot - it's coming!

HEMINGS:

It had better be good. After all, you do have a reputation to live up to!

Everyone laughs and SHAKESPEARE stands up: he waits for the laughter to stop before speaking. When he speaks, he projects beyond the table to THE AUDIENCE, as if they too were guests.

SHAKESPEARE:

I simply want to thank you all for coming today, especially those of you, like John and Henry - *(He smiles at HEMINGS and CONDELL and they smile back)* who have come from afar!

HEMINGS:

It was our pleasure.

CONDELL (nodding):

Indeed.

HEMINGS:

Even if the journey nearly killed us!

Everyone laughs, but HEMINGS shakes his head.

HEMINGS:

Three days on the worst, most rutted roads in England.

CONDELL (to SHAKESPEARE):

It was too far for Burbage. He's too ill to travel.

SHAKESPEARE (nodding):

I know. He said so in his letter.

HEMINGS looks up at SHAKESPEARE and smiles.

HEMINGS:

No wonder you stayed in London all those years, Will. It would be easier to travel to the West Indies than it is to Warwickshire!

Laughter, and when it stops, SHAKESPEARE turns to THE GROOM.

SHAKESPEARE:

I also want to thank Thomas.

THOMAS (looking confused):

Me? What for?

SHAKESPEARE (smiling):

For finally taking Judith off our hands. I thought it would never happen! (*ALL laugh except JUDITH, who looks embarrassed.*) Seriously, Thomas, your father is one of my oldest friends in Stratford and I am delighted at the union of our two families.

RICHARD QUINEY (calling out):

We both are!

SHAKESPEARE smiles at RICHARD QUINEY.

SHAKESPEARE:

And finally I want to thank my own family: Judith - (*He indicates JUDITH, sitting next to him.*) Susanna and Anne, who are both so far away at the end of the table that I can hardly see them!

He feigns peering into the distance and EVERYONE laughs.

HEMINGS (calling out):

That'll teach you to have such a big house!

Once again, EVERYONE laughs.

SHAKESPEARE:

They have had *much* to endure over the years, while I was in London.

JUDITH:

You were working, Father. We know that - we *always* knew that!

SHAKESPEARE looks at her lovingly.

SHAKESPEARE:

It is kind of you to say so, Judith, but I know that I have missed *much* that has happened in your life. (*Again, he looks to the far end of the table, where Susanna and Anne are sitting.*) I have missed much that has happened in *all* your lives. (*Suddenly he looks thoughtful, even sad.*) I was away when my children were little; I was away when they grew up; I was even away when my beloved boy Hamnet - Judith's twin - was taken from us by the plague. (*He lowers his head.*) God bless his soul.

EVERYONE else lowers their head, too.

EVERYONE (TOGETHER, but quietly):

God bless his soul.

SHAKESPEARE looks as if he might cry, but then resumes.

SHAKESPEARE:

But all of that *absence* only makes my *presence* here today all the more precious. And so, without further ado, I ask you to raise your glasses to Judith and Thomas - the bride and groom!

The toast is taken up around the table: "THE BRIDE AND GROOM". JUDITH and THOMAS look embarrassed but then kiss, to the sound of applause, cheers and even the banging of fists on the table.

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:

And we missed him. Nevertheless, it was a great day and not just because I have finally "married off" the last of my daughters. (*HEMINGS and CONDELL laugh, but he looks at them very seriously.*) 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 & HEMINGS and CONDELL look at him questioningly.*) 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 the *Mayor*, even - had been stripped of his powers and position. (*HEMINGS & CONDELL look surprised.*) 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 wonder.

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 & CONDELL.*) 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 HEMINGS and CONDELL.*) 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.*) To the Shakespeares and the Quineys.

HEMINGS & CONDELL raise their glasses, still looking surprised.

HEMINGS AND CONDELL (together):

"The Shakespeares and the Quineys."

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

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

SHAKESPEARE (calling out):

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

He goes to the door and opens it to find JUDITH in the doorway. She looks distraught, with her hair tangled (as if she has been tearing at it), & she is in her 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.)* 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.)
Who did he - *(He pauses, trying to find 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.

SHAKESPEARE continues to stare at her.

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.

SHAKESPEARE looks stunned and 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! You're the richest and most powerful man in Stratford, Father. If anyone can help Thomas, it's you.

SHAKESPEARE looks alarmed.

JUDITH:

Please help him: if not for his own sake, then for mine. (*Again, she begins to cry.*) I know he didn't do it, Father. He'd never do such a thing. (*Pause, while still crying.*) 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 TWO (JAIL CELL)

SHAKESPEARE (now dressed) enters a jail cell & the door is locked behind him. THOMAS QUINEY, who wears a generic grey prisoner's uniform, stands up from the grubby bed he has been 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:

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 just 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.*) "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 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.)* 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, then slowly puts an arm around him.

SCENE THREE (SHAKESPEARE'S STUDY)

There is a knock at the door.

SHAKESPEARE:

Come in.

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

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 FOUR (COURTROOM)

SHAKESPEARE AND JUDITH sit at the back of the courtroom: THOMAS AND MR COLLINS at the front. THOMAS turns & looks back at JUDITH AND SHAKESPEARE but turns round again as a COURT OFFICIAL enters.

COURT OFFICIAL:

All rise for the court's verdict.

Everyone stands as a SENIOR "JUDGE" (in reality, a Senior Priest) enters and sits at the raised platform at the front. 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 back at SHAKESPEARE, before quickly turning back round again to face the front.

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 and he and the COURT OFFICIAL exit: as they go, THOMAS calls 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 his papers in his bag, smiles.

THOMAS (to SHAKESPEARE):

Thank you.

SHAKESPEARE:

You're welcome.

THOMAS smiles at SHAKESPEARE but SHAKESPEARE doesn't 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.*) 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 stands 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 FIVE (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 knock at it.

SHAKESPEARE:

Come in.

THOMAS enters, looking tired 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.*) 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 of Stratford.

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 to the door: THOMAS watches him go out, then totally slumps back in his seat, looking even sicker than before.

SCENE SIX (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, opening it to find an angry-looking SHAKESPEARE.

RICHARD QUINEY:

Will! What are you doing here? Come in.

SHAKESPEARE enters and RICHARD QUINEY shuts 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.

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 (interrupting):

"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: when he is gone, QUINEY looks even more bilious than before.

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

There is a knocking at the door and a distraught-looking JUDITH opens it, to find 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/:

Yes. He said he wanted to "get drunk" and "forget" his problems. (Pause.) I wish I could forget *mine*.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

JUDITH:

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 astonishment.

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 astonished.

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 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.*) Now I wish I had never married.

SHAKESPEARE holds her but looks off, in a daze, to the distance.

SCENE EIGHT (HALLWAY, SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE)

SHAKESPEARE enters and leans back against the door or wall for support, as if fearful he might collapse without such support. His wife, ANNE, a woman of 60, enters and 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 this morning, 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, everything! How you'd found out the truth about him, how you'd cut him out of your will and how he now *hated* all of us, especially *you*, and wished he'd never married Judith.

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 more surprised & there is silence for a moment.

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 completely astounded.

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?" (*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 walks away, exiting: SHAKESPEARE remains standing there for a moment, then slumps back against the front door or wall again.

ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE (TAVERN)

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

MAN:

Will! Over here!

SHAKESPEARE goes 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.)* 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 on the table before exiting and *SHAKESPEARE* picks one up.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

He downs his ale "in one", then sighs, as DRAYTON stares at him.

A TALL, RED-HAIRED, BARREL-CHESTED MAN enters the tavern.

MAN (calling out):

DRAYTON!

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

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 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, but before he can say anything JONSON has joined them and he greets DRAYTON warmly.

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

Finally JONSON realises what SHAKESPEARE means.

JONSON:

Oh, *that!* *(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.)* "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 at him intently, 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 laugh. The WAITRESS enters, JONSON signals to her to bring three tankards of ale and she exits to get them.

SCENE TWO (TAVERN)

It is closing time (the WAITRESS puts some chairs on tables before exiting), and SHAKESPEARE, JONSON & DRAYTON look very drunk. With considerable effort, DRAYTON turns to SHAKESPEARE.

DRAYTON:

Where's your horse?

SHAKESPEARE:

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.

Slowly, SHAKESPEARE shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

No. I've had enough for one night. (*He looks at the door.*) Besides, it's a dry night. I shall enjoy a little *stroll!*

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 THREE (HALLWAY, SHAKESPEARE'S HOUSE)

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

ANNE:

Oh, Judith. Thank God you've come.

JUDITH:

I came as soon as I received word that 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:

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

JUDITH immediately looks alarmed.

JUDITH:

A fever?

ANNE:

Yes. Oh Judith, he's terribly ill. I've sent for John, but I'm
not sure even a doctor can help him.

JUDITH:

Let me see him.

They both exit, hurriedly.

SCENE FOUR (SHAKESPEARE'S BEDROOM)

SHAKESPEARE lies in bed with eyes closed & his face covered in sweat. JUDITH & ANNE enter, JUDITH going to the end of the bed.

JUDITH:

Father!

She turns round to look at her mother.

JUDITH:

He looks awful.

ANNE:

I know. I'm afraid the fever has already 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 appalled, as SHAKESPEARE opens his eyes slightly.

SHAKESPEARE (weakly, even feebly):

I'm so hot.

ANNE:

I know, Will. I know.

She goes to the bedside table, takes a cloth from a bowl 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 resumes her slow, methodical mopping of his brow; JUDITH lowers her head and starts to cry.

SCENE FIVE (HOLY TRINITY CHURCH IN STRATFORD)

HEMINGS and CONDELL enter, leading TWO OTHER PALLBEARERS as they all carry Shakespeare's coffin into the church & set it down on two wooden stands centre-stage. They all check it is secure on the stands, then HEMINGS AND CONDELL go and kneel down (stage right) while the TWO OTHER PALLBEARERS go to the back of the church and exit. HEMINGS and CONDELL kneel in silence and when they finally 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 silence again for a moment. Then -

HEMINGS:

I still can't believe it.

CONDELL:

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

HEMINGS nods and again there is complete 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 and slowly the lights come down.

ACT FIVE, SCENE ONE. BACKSTAGE OFFICE, REBUILT GLOBE THEATRE

HEMINGS and CONDELL are in the office of the (rebuilt) Globe: CONDELL sits, holding a letter, while HEMINGS stands over him.

CONDELL (reading aloud):

"...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."

He puts the letter down and HEMINGS stares down at it.

HEMINGS:

"Mourning rings"?

CONDELL nods.

HEMINGS:

That's how he wants us to remember him?

CONDELL:

Apparently.

HEMINGS shakes his head.

Slowly the lights come down.

EPILOGUE: SCENE ONE (BACKSTAGE OFFICE AT REBUILT GLOBE THEATRE)

CONDELL sits 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.

HEMINGS:

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

CONDELL glances at an identical ring on his left little finger.

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.) It doesn't even fit! Last week, when I tried to hail a fellow in the street - (He 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 (angrily):

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. (He looks at HEMINGS with fury.) 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 snatches up the piece of paper and the coins, and exits.

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's 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 carved leather cover*) it contains *all* his plays, from *The Alchemist* to *Volpone*.

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

HEMINGS (smiling):

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.

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 did happen! *(He laughs.)* That's why Mister Jonson was so anxious to publish his own plays himself: to preserve them for posterity, in all their glory. And he's said: "Hang the thieves who perform them without paying!" *(Pause & smile.)* 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!* (*He laughs.*) He hardly ranks alongside Mister Jonson. 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 thought I had something.

HEMINGS:

What is it?

THE BOOKSELLER rises, 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. HEMINGS waits for a moment, then lets the book 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.

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 from a pocket the slim, torn, grubby play-script the Bookseller had shown him, holds it up with both hands and then lets it fall gently (it almost floats down, as it is so light) on to CONDELL's desk. Once it lands, CONDELL stares at it.

CONDELL (reading):

"The Tragicall 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.*) 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 simply lost over time, most likely when we moved theatres. As for the plays we do have copies of, a lot 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 ever 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" them 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 looks at HEMINGS suspiciously.

CONDELL:

Whose immortality? His, or ours?

HEMINGS looks upset, even offended.

HEMINGS:

Why, his of course.

CONDELL sighs, deeply.

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 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. *(He thumps the desk, scattering coins.)* 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 speed 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. And 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 try and elucidate all the notes and stage directions and *scribblings* that have been added over the years.

HEMINGS suddenly stops pacing up and down 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 pauses and 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 quizzically.

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 absolute wonder.

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 and grimace.)* 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 in Europe.

HEMINGS (imitating Burbage):

Nay, the *world!*

JONSON laughs.

HEMINGS:

He did so much for us.

CONDELL:

This was the least we could do for him.

JONSON 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. As he exits, HEMINGS looks at CONDELL.

HEMINGS:

Seven years, from start to finish.

CONDELL:

You don't have to tell me!

HEMINGS:

I know. But what are a few years - even seven - compared with immortality?

CONDELL smiles.

CONDELL:

Nothing at all, John. Nothing at all.

HEMINGS smiles back at him.

Slowly, the lights come down.

- **END** -