

THE SHAKESPEARE PLAYS

Two Screenplays about the life of
William Shakespeare

by Martin Keady

PART I – THE COMMISSION

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A caption appears: "LONDON. 1601".

Fade up to:

1. INT. BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE - 37, balding, bearded and with an ear-ring in his left ear - sits at a desk in the backstage office of The Globe Theatre, quill in hand.

The backstage office is a tiny room stuffed with props and costumes, and through the door (which is slightly ajar) The Globe's thatched roof can just be seen.

A young BOY - dressed as a sheep, complete with woolly head-dress and ears - runs up to the door.

BOY:

Master Shakespeare, Sir?

SHAKESPEARE (without looking up):

Yes...?

BOY:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

Who is it?

BOY:

A nobleman, Sir.

SHAKESPEARE finally looks up at him.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SHAKESPEARE smiles, but the BOY just looks confused.

BOY:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

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

BOY:

The Earl of Southampton, Sir.

SHAKESPEARE immediately stops smiling and looks very grave.

SHAKESPEARE:

Tell him I'm coming.

BOY:

Yes, Sir. Right away, Sir.

The BOY runs back out, his woollen "tail" bobbing behind him.

SHAKESPEARE sighs, puts down his quill and follows him out.

2. INT/EXT. THE STAGE, THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

SHAKESPEARE walks out onto The Globe's stage.

Standing at the front of the stage is a handsome and exquisitely dressed YOUNG MAN, aged about 30, with black curly hair and a neatly trimmed moustache and beard.

At the back of the stage, staring at the YOUNG MAN (and his fine clothes), are a "SHEPHERD" and his "SHEEP": in reality, an ACTOR holding a shepherd's crook and SEVERAL BOYS dressed as sheep, including the BOY who had summoned Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE (to the "SHEPHERD"):

Feed your flock.

The "SHEPHERD" leads off the "SHEEP", some of them "BAA"-ing as they go.

Hearing this, the YOUNG MAN turns round and sees SHAKESPEARE.

YOUNG MAN (smiling):

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!*

The YOUNG MAN laughs.

YOUNG MAN:

It's a pleasure to see you, Will.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SHAKESPEARE bows deeply and the YOUNG MAN - THE EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON - looks pleased by this show of obeisance.

Then SOUTHAMPTON looks out from the stage again.

His POINT OF VIEW:

He looks at the ground (or "Groundlings" area) in front of the stage, which is for the poorest theatregoers; then up at the seats above, which are for the wealthier patrons; and finally up at the thatched roof, forming a "wooden" (or more precisely "straw") 'O', through which the sky is visible.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

He looks back at SHAKESPEARE.

SOUTHAMPTON:

You're obviously doing very well for yourself.

SHAKESPEARE looks back at SOUTHAMPTON.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON smiles.

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, Sir.

SOUTHAMPTON looks at him in surprise.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SOUTHAMPTON laughs, but SHAKESPEARE looks a little nervous.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON (nodding):

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

SHAKESPEARE suddenly looks embarrassed.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON looks upset, even offended, before smiling again.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

Me, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Yes, *you* Will.

He smiles at him broadly.

SOUTHAMPTON:

I want to commission a special production in honour of my noble Lord Essex.

SHAKESPEARE looks nervous.

SHAKESPEARE:

Of which play, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON looks shocked.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE looks appalled.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON:

You mean the scene where Richard hands over his crown?

SHAKESPEARE (nodding):

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

SOUTHAMPTON (angrily):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks at him in amazement.

SHAKESPEARE:

"A week today", my Lord? Why, even if we *could* perform "*Richard*", we would need more than a week to prepare!

SOUTHAMPTON:

Nonsense! Your men have all performed the play before. It won't take them long to refresh their memories.

SHAKESPEARE takes a deep breath.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON (angrily):

No! It must be "*Richard*".

He looks imploringly at SHAKESPEARE.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE looks confused.

SHAKESPEARE:

Is it, my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Of course it is! *(Pause.)* It is the story of a vengeful, despotic ruler who is *corrupted* by their advisers and consequently *robs* the nobles of their titles, just as the Queen has been *corrupted* by Lord Cecil and *robbed* the Earl of Essex of *his* title of vice-regent.

He sighs, heavily.

SOUTHAMPTON:

He was effectively the heir to the throne, Will, until the Queen grew jealous of his achievements in battle, achievements that she - a mere *woman* - could never match.

SHAKESPEARE:

Like the rest of England, my Lord, I was led to believe he had made an "unauthorised peace" with the Irish rebels.

SOUTHAMPTON (furiously):

He tried to stop a war that no monarch - not the Queen, nor even her father, the great Henry the Eighth - could stop, and for that he is *rewarded* with house arrest and public humiliation!

He looks at SHAKESPEARE questioningly.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Is that *fair*, Will?

SHAKESPEARE:

It does not *seem* fair, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON (emphatically):

It is *not* fair! And that is why we want to honour the Earl. By staging "*Richard the Second*" in front of an audience of veterans -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting, nervously):

"Veterans", my Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE (even more nervously):

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.

SHAKESPEARE looks absolutely astonished.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON (firmly):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks pained.

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 dethroning scene, I may find myself upon the *rack*.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE looks stunned.

SHAKESPEARE:

My Lord?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Do you forget the debt you owe me, Will?

SHAKESPEARE looks embarrassed, even ashamed.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

I know, my Lord.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE *(interrupting)*:

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

SOUTHAMPTON *(angrily)*:

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

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

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON (angrily):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks humbled, even humiliated.

SOUTHAMPTON (lowering his voice):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks frightened.

SHAKESPEARE:

And if I do not, or cannot?

For a moment, SOUTHAMPTON looks surprised.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Then I will have to *demand* repayment of the money I have given you, in full, with interest - *immediately!*

SHAKESPEARE looks mortified.

SHAKESPEARE:

I cannot pay you back that amount, Sir, not immediately.
You know I can't.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE again looks around The Globe for a few moments.

SHAKESPEARE (quietly):

I would have to persuade my business partners.

SOUTHAMPTON looks at him sceptically.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Your "business partners"?

SHAKESPEARE (nodding):

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

SOUTHAMPTON smiles, confidently.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SOUTHAMPTON laughs, but SHAKESPEARE just looks very serious.

SHAKESPEARE:

We'll need paying.

SOUTHAMPTON (nodding):

Of course. That goes without saying. I will pay *handsomely!*

SHAKESPEARE:

And the production will only be for your guests - your "veterans" and other followers of the Earl - and *not* the general public.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Of course.

SHAKESPEARE:

Finally, and most importantly, if any of the Queen's men should appear we will stop performing *immediately*, or at least *drop* the dethroning scene.

SOUTHAMPTON (nodding):

Agreed.

SHAKESPEARE takes another deep breath.

SHAKESPEARE:

Then I will do my best to arrange it.

SOUTHAMPTON stares at him, seemingly overcome with emotion.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SOUTHAMPTON *(nodding)*:

I will do it. Happily!

He looks ecstatic and looks around The Globe once more.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

SHAKESPEARE *(quietly, to himself)*:

"And *all* the men and women merely players..."

3. INT. BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

SHAKESPEARE's business partners (and the co-owners of The Globe) - JOHN HEMINGS (fat and 45), HENRY CONDELL (thin and 25) and RICHARD BURBAGE (red-haired, muscular and 34) - are standing opposite SHAKESPEARE, shaking their heads.

HEMINGS:

We *can't* perform "*Richard the Second*" - at least not with the *dethroning* scene.

CONDELL:

If the Queen or any member of the Privy Council - especially *Lord Cecil!* - finds out, we will be *killed!*

BURBAGE:

Or *worse* - sent to the *Tower!*

HEMINGS and *CONDELL* laugh *ruefully*, but *BURBAGE* looks at *SHAKESPEARE* *quizzically*.

BURBAGE:

Why does Southampton even *want* a performance of "*Richard the Second*", "complete with *dethroning* scene"?

SHAKESPEARE *hesitates* for a moment before *answering*.

SHAKESPEARE:

It is in honour of the Earl of Essex.

BURBAGE, *HEMINGS* and *CONDELL* all look *amazed*.

BURBAGE:

"The Earl of Essex"? But he's under house arrest for treason.

SHAKESPEARE (nodding):

I know.

SHAKESPEARE looks away, as if he is embarrassed - or guilty.

SHAKESPEARE:

Southampton wants to *stir* Essex's followers, including his former *soldiers*, to petition the Queen.

CONDELL (looking alarmed):

To do what?

SHAKESPEARE:

To restore Essex's title of vice-regent and reinstate him as the heir to the throne.

CONDELL looks as if he might collapse in shock.

CONDELL:

The Queen won't give in to any "petition"!

SHAKESPEARE:

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

He looks at them all in desperation.

SHAKESPEARE:

He *demands* that I do as he asks. Otherwise, he will demand *immediate* repayment of all the money he supposedly "gave" me over the years, including the money for the "Sonnets" that I wrote in his honour and the money he gave me to invest in the Globe.

HEMINGS, CONDELL and BURBAGE look horrified.

HEMINGS:

Perhaps we - the rest of the company -

He looks at BURBAGE and CONDELL.

HEMINGS:

- could find the money to repay him.

BURBAGE (nodding):

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

CONDELL 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.

HEMINGS:

But *this* -

He stares at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

This is pulling the dragon's tail! You risk everything!

SHAKESPEARE:

I know, but I have no choice.

He takes a deep breath.

SHAKESPEARE:

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 disbelief.

SHAKESPEARE (incredulously):

What? *Why?*

HEMINGS:

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

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

HEMINGS:

For another, *I owe you.*

SHAKESPEARE looks at him questioningly.

SHAKESPEARE:

You don't owe me anything, John.

HEMINGS (emphatically):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks surprised - but pleased.

HEMINGS stares at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

I owe you *everything*, Will - my career, my fortune, *everything!*

HEMINGS looks at BURBAGE and CONDELL.

HEMINGS:

We *all* do.

BURBAGE and CONDELL both nod.

BURBAGE (to SHAKESPEARE):

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 humble fishmonger!

SHAKESPEARE laughs.

HEMINGS:

We *all* owe you for making us what we are. *That's* why we'll help you to discharge your debt to Southampton, once and for all.

Then he looks at them all warmly and smiles.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you - *all* of you.

Suddenly he stops smiling and looks very serious.

SHAKESPEARE:

I told Southampton that the production will only be for Essex's supporters - his "veterans" - and not the general public.

HEMINGS (nodding):

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

SHAKESPEARE:

And I also told him that if any of the Queen's men should appear we will stop performing *immediately*, or at least *drop* the dethroning scene.

CONDELL (nodding):

Absolutely!

SHAKESPEARE looks at them questioningly, even sceptically.

SHAKESPEARE:

Now we just have to persuade the *men*.

HEMINGS (brusquely):

"The men"? (Pause.) Hang the men!

SHAKESPEARE looks at him in surprise.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Hang them"?

HEMINGS (nodding):

Aye. They'll do what we say or they can find *another* company.

He smiles at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

There are plenty of other companies in London, but there's only one Shakespeare - and they know it!

SHAKESPEARE looks simultaneously flattered and nervous.

Fade up to:

4. INT. THE WINGS OF THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

SHAKESPEARE and HEMINGS, in make-up and costume as "John of Gaunt" and "The Duke of York", peer out from the wings.

They see the Globe (or at least the Groundlings' area) is filling up with an AUDIENCE that is exclusively male and mostly made up of pock-marked, battle-scarred WAR VETERANS.

HEMINGS:

My God! There's a whole army out there!

SHAKESPEARE:

Literally!

HEMINGS looks shocked, but SHAKESPEARE does not notice as he watches SOUTHAMPTON take his seat above the Groundlings' area.

He is flanked by TWO GUARDS and as he sits down he acknowledges SOME AUDIENCE MEMBERS standing directly below him.

SHAKESPEARE:

Southampton has obviously recognised some old friends.

HEMINGS (scornfully):

They're not "friends": they're men who fought under him and Essex in Ireland. (Pause) They serve him - just as we do!

SHAKESPEARE looks shocked, but HEMINGS looks away.

Then a trumpet sounds to announce the start of the play.

HEMINGS:

We are summoned.

SHAKESPEARE nods, then he, HEMINGS and THE OTHER ACTORS in the first scene walk on stage, to a huge round of applause.

5. INT/EXT. STAGE, THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

SHAKESPEARE, as "John of Gaunt", is sitting in a chair, looking sickly - in fact, he looks as if he is dying - and HEMINGS, as "The Duke of York", is listening to him carefully.

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*."

SHAKESPEARE pauses for effect and notices that *ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE AUDIENCE* are staring up at him intently, including *A MAN WITH JUST ONE EYE*.

He is almost thrown by this sight, but manages to continue.

SHAKESPEARE (as John of Gaunt):

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

6. INT. THE WINGS OF THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and CONDELL watch as *BURBAGE* (playing King Richard) and *AUGUSTINE PHILIPS* (fresh-faced, about 30 and playing the rebel Bolingbroke) confront each other on stage.

SHAKESPEARE (whispering):

This is it - the dethroning scene.

HEMINGS (also whispering):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks at HEMINGS in horror but HEMINGS is already looking back out at the stage.

SHAKESPEARE also looks back at the stage and as he does so, he sees SOUTHAMPTON standing up in his seat and willing the actors on - indeed, he mouths the lines as they speak them.

SHAKESPEARE stares at SOUTHAMPTON in amazement.

7. INT/EXT. THE STAGE, GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

BURBAGE removes the crown from his head.

BURBAGE (as King Richard):

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

8. INT. THE WINGS, GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

HEMINGS whispers in SHAKESPEARE's ear.

HEMINGS:

The Queen won't give up her throne, if that's what they're hoping!

Once again, SHAKESPEARE looks round at him in shock.

9. INT/EXT. THE STAGE, THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

BURBAGE (as Richard) is lying in a coffin in the centre of the stage, while PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke) weeps over him.

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).

The stage empties and for a moment the theatre is silent.

Then there is applause, followed by a series of loud cries.

AUDIENCE MEMBERS (together):

God save our Gracious General!

OTHER AUDIENCE MEMBERS (together, even louder):

God save the Earl of Essex!

Finally, a cry is taken up by THE WHOLE AUDIENCE.

AUDIENCE (AS ONE):

GOD SAVE THE KING!

10. INT. THE WINGS OF THE GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

SHAKESPEARE and ALL THE OTHER ACTORS watch in amazement from the wings as THE AUDIENCE continue to applaud, cheer and chant.

SHAKESPEARE (to HEMINGS):

Should we take a bow?

HEMINGS (shaking his head):

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

Finally, the chants and the cheers begin to die down.

Once again, SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and THE OTHER ACTORS peer out from the wings to see what is happening off-stage.

They see SOUTHAMPTON'S GUARDS standing beside the exit and putting coins in the hands of the VETERANS as they leave.

HEMINGS:

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

CONDELL (nodding):

It explains their enthusiasm.

Suddenly SOUTHAMPTON appears, accompanied by SEVERAL OTHER WELL-DRESSED NOBLES, each one grinning as broadly as he is.

SOUTHAMPTON heads straight for SHAKESPEARE and shakes his hand.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you, Will. Thank you.

Then he turns to address ALL THE OTHER ACTORS.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you all! You were wonderful - just wonderful!

SOME OF THE YOUNGER ACTORS look flattered but THE OLDER ONES, like BURBAGE and HEMINGS, do not.

SOUTHAMPTON turns back to SHAKESPEARE and takes out a letter from his pocket that is wrapped in a bright red ribbon.

SOUTHAMPTON:

And by way of thanks, 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 -

A NOBLE comes forward with a bag bulging with coins.

SOUTHAMPTON:

- Is the final payment for the rest of you. I think that you will find it *exceeding* generous! But you have earned every penny.

CONDELL takes the bag, but almost drops it as it is so heavy.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Thank you once again, from myself and my Master. It was *marvellous* - all that we had hoped for!

He smiles at THE OTHER NOBLES, before addressing THE ACTORS.

SOUTHAMPTON:

After such an *exhilarating* performance, we are *emboldened!*

He and THE OTHER NOBLES depart as quickly as they had come.

HEMINGS leans over towards SHAKESPEARE and whispers to him.

HEMINGS:

"Embaldened" to do *what?*

SHAKESPEARE looks at him nervously.

11. INT. STUDY. DAY (EARLY MORNING).

A TALL, RED-HAIRED MAN dressed all in white is standing by the window, looking out at the River Thames.

Slowly, he turns to reveal he is wearing a scabbard with a sword in it.

He stares at THE MEN who have assembled in his study: SOUTHAMPTON; THE OTHER NOBLES who had been with SOUTHAMPTON at The Globe; and SEVERAL BATTLE-SCARRED VETERANS who had also been at The Globe.

RED-HAIRED MAN (to SOUTHAMPTON):

How was the performance?

SOUTHAMPTON (smiling):

Magnificent, my lord! It rallied the troops wonderfully!

He beams at the RED-HAIRED MAN - THE EARL OF ESSEX.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Having seen a monarch surrender power on stage, they are ready to see one surrender power for real!

THE OTHERS all laugh, even ESSEX.

ESSEX:

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

SOUTHAMPTON (nodding):

Indeed, my Lord.

ESSEX:

Like 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 (angrily):

That cannot happen.

SOUTHAMPTON:

No. It cannot.

Suddenly ESSEX looks at them all questioningly.

ESSEX:

Once we leave this room, 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 *Cecil*, will no doubt describe it. And the same is true for any man who helps me.

He looks round at them all, one by one.

ESSEX:

If any of you want to leave - to *abandon* me - go now. Otherwise, you must stay the course.

No-one moves, so ESSEX smiles.

ESSEX:

Good. Then let us claim what is *ours!*

He goes out and is followed by THE OTHERS: as they leave, they step over THE SOLDIERS who had obviously been keeping ESSEX under "house arrest" but who are now tied up in the corridor.

12. EXT. ESSEX'S COURTYARD. DAY (EARLY MORNING).

ESSEX stands on the steps of his house and addresses the 300 or so VETERANS who have assembled in the courtyard.

ESSEX:

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

THE VETERANS cheer.

ESSEX:

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

Once again, THE VETERANS cheer.

ESSEX:

Then we shall have the glory - and the riches - that the Queen and Lord Cecil denied us!

This elicits the loudest cheer of all and ESSEX strides down the steps towards the VETERANS, who continue to applaud him.

13. EXT. LUDGATE (LONDON STREET). DAY (EARLY MORNING).

ESSEX, SOUTHAMPTON and THE OTHER NOBLES, who are all on horseback, lead ESSEX's MEN, who are all on foot.

There is no-one else about except a few EARLY RISERS (including a BAKER carrying fresh bread) who stop and stare.

SOUTHAMPTON (calling out to them, triumphantly):

Fear not, good fellows. You will soon be *liberated!*

THE BAKER and THE OTHER EARLY RISERS look shocked - and scared.

14. EXT. LUDGATE. DAY.

A NOBLEMAN is riding down Ludgate when he suddenly stops.

His POINT OF VIEW:

He can just see, at the other end of the street, ESSEX'S MEN - on horseback and on foot - and they are coming towards him.

For a moment he looks astonished, but then he wheels his horse round and quickly rides back in the direction he had come from.

He rides up to a guard-post, where about FIFTY SOLDIERS are stretching and yawning in the early morning sun.

NOBLEMAN (calling out):

Quick! We must barricade the street.

THE SOLDIERS all look up at him in surprise.

FIRST SOLDIER:

What?

SECOND SOLDIER:

Why, my Lord?

NOBLEMAN:

Because a group of armed men - a *large* group - is coming this way and they look as if they mean to gain entry to the Palace. *(Pause.)* We *must* not let them pass.

Finally THE SOLDIERS understand and rush inside the guard-post.

NOBLEMAN:

And for God's sake, send to the Palace for reinforcements!

A THIRD SOLDIER immediately runs off towards the Palace.

As THE SOLDIERS begin carrying out chairs and tables from the guard-post, the NOBLEMAN nervously looks back down the street.

15. EXT. LUDGATE. DAY.

ESSEX, SOUTHAMPTON and the OTHER NOBLES on horseback are all smiling broadly as they slowly trot down the street.

Suddenly they stop smiling and stop riding, forcing THE MEN on foot behind them to stop walking.

Their POINT OF VIEW:

Directly ahead of them, a barricade of chairs and tables has been erected to block off the street and behind it are the FIFTY SOLDIERS, spears raised, and the NOBLEMAN on his horse.

NOBLEMAN (calling out):

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

Nonchalantly, ESSEX rides forward.

ESSEX:

'Tis I, Sheriff - the Earl of Essex.

THE NOBLEMAN - THE SHERIFF - looks astonished.

SHERIFF:

My Lord Essex?

He looks at the MEN massed behind ESSEX.

SHERIFF:

What do you mean by this show of force?

ESSEX (smiling):

I have come to reclaim my title of vice-regent.

He extends a hand towards the SHERIFF.

ESSEX:

Join us.

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

SHERIFF:

I must order you to lay down your arms, my Lord - *at once!*

ESSEX laughs.

ESSEX:

I will surrender neither my *rights* nor my *claim*.

SHERIFF (angrily):

Then, Sir, you are a *traitor!*

ESSEX looks furious.

ESSEX:

Those are the words of *Cecil* and his *parasites!*

He pulls out his sword, looks round and gives the order.

ESSEX:

CHARGE!

ESSEX leads his MEN as they rush towards the barricade.

As they approach, THE SHERIFF looks round at his SOLDIERS.

SHERIFF:

We must hold them at bay.

THE SOLDIERS nod nervously.

Then ESSEX and THE OTHER NOBLES on horseback smash into the barricade, their horses literally rearing up over it.

The SHERIFF rides forward, his sword drawn to confront ESSEX.

ESSEX and THE SHERIFF's swords crash together as ESSEX'S MEN try to scramble over the barricade: some are about to succeed when there is suddenly a huge roar from behind the barricade.

Everyone, including ESSEX and the SHERIFF, stops fighting and turns round to see where the noise is coming from.

Their POINT OF VIEW:

Hurtling towards the barricade are at least a HUNDRED MEN on horseback, followed by SEVERAL HUNDRED MEN on foot.

SHERIFF (smiling broadly):

Reinforcements! (Pause.) Thank God - and Lord Cecil!

He turns to face ESSEX, who looks devastated.

ESSEX'S MEN, or at least those on foot, see the HORSEMEN approaching and immediately turn round and start running away.

ESSEX watches them go, then looks at SOUTHAMPTON in disbelief.

ESSEX:

Where are they going?

THE SHERIFF calls out to ESSEX from behind the barricade.

SHERIFF:

Your "veterans", my Lord, are obviously tired of fighting!

For a moment, ESSEX looks back at THE SHERIFF in horror but then he wheels his horse round and rides off after his MEN, followed by SOUTHAMPTON and THE OTHER NOBLES on horseback.

THE SHERIFF and HIS TROOPS cheer as the "REINFORCEMENTS" on horseback leap over the barricade to follow ESSEX and his MEN.

16. INT. ESSEX'S STUDY. DAY.

ESSEX, SOUTHAMPTON and THE NOBLES are holed up in Essex's study: they have erected their own "barricade", by blocking the door with furniture, but it is about to be broken down.

As they watch, the door begins to splinter and split apart.

ESSEX:

There is nothing left but the Roman way.

THE OTHER NOBLES nod grimly, but SOUTHAMPTON looks terrified.

SOUTHAMPTON:

Kill ourselves? But we will go to *hell!*

ESSEX:

'Tis better than the Tower!

SOUTHAMPTON looks appalled.

The door is finally broken down and a CAPTAIN enters the room.

CAPTAIN (calling out to his SOLDIERS behind):

Disarm them! The Queen will want them *alive!*

SEVERAL SOLDIERS enter the room: as they do so, ONE OF THE NOBLES immediately holds his sword with both hands and stabs himself in the stomach.

THE OTHER NOBLES hesitate as they watch him die and SEVERAL SOLDIERS wrestle their swords away and force them to the floor.

ESSEX and SOUTHAMPTON withdraw towards the window as SEVERAL OTHER SOLDIERS advance towards them with their swords drawn.

As they reach the window, ESSEX turns to face SOUTHAMPTON and points his sword at him.

ESSEX:

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

SOUTHAMPTON shakes his head.

SOUTHAMPTON:

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

ESSEX stares at him in disbelief.

ESSEX:

TURNCOAT!

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

He is about to try again when THREE SOLDIERS grab him from behind, wrestle his sword away and force him to the ground.

As ESSEX continues to struggle, even as he lies on the ground, SOUTHAMPTON lowers his sword, kneels down and begins to weep.

17. INT. BACKSTAGE OFFICE, THE GLOBE THEATRE. NIGHT.

The office is illuminated by candle-light as SHAKESPEARE writes, HEMINGS mends a costume and CONDELL counts money.

BURBAGE enters, filling the doorway with his large frame.

BURBAGE:

Have you heard?

They all stop what they are doing and look up at him.

SHAKESPEARE:

Heard what?

BURBAGE:

Essex and Southampton have led a rebellion against the Queen.

SHAKESPEARE:

WHAT?!

HEMINGS:

Oh, my God!

BURBAGE:

The rebellion failed and both men, along with what remains of their "followers", are in the Tower.

CONDELL (softly):

And we shall soon join them.

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

18. INT/EXT. THE STAGE, GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

An exhausted-looking SHAKESPEARE, BURBAGE, HEMINGS AND CONDELL (they have obviously not slept) are standing on the stage.

THE OTHER ACTORS from "Richard the Second", including AUGUSTINE PHILIPS, are sitting around them, looking petrified.

SHAKESPEARE:

So what do we say?

PHILIPS (blankly):

To whom?

SHAKESPEARE (incredulous):

The Queen's men, of course!

He looks off-stage, as if he were looking out into the city.

SHAKESPEARE:

They will be here soon enough. 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. (Pause.) When they do, what do we say?

HEMINGS laughs grimly and SHAKESPEARE stares at him in wonder.

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 nods, solemnly.

SHAKESPEARE:

Aye. 'Tis the first time.

HEMINGS:

I say we tell the truth.

SHAKESPEARE:

"The truth"?

HEMINGS:

Aye, that we - the *company* -

He looks pointedly at SHAKESPEARE as he says this.

HEMINGS:

- owed Southampton a debt and merely sought to discharge it.

CONDELL:

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

CONDELL looks at HEMINGS and slowly shakes his head.

CONDELL:

I think not.

For a moment, there is silence.

CONDELL:

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.

He smiles, mischievously.

CONDELL:

The authorities all think that players are little better than *whores!* Well, let us *act* like *whores* and say that we did it for the money - and no other reason.

HEMINGS looks at CONDELL admiringly.

HEMINGS:

Good idea, Henry. For once, let's *profit* from their prejudices!

CONDELL *looks flattered.*

ACTOR (VOICE OFF):

Why *not* tell the truth, Will?

EVERYONE *looks round, and down, at an actor called BRYANT (aged about 25), who is sitting on the floor but looking up at SHAKESPEARE accusingly.*

SHAKESPEARE:

What "truth"?

BRYANT (angrily):

That you *loved* Southampton!

SHAKESPEARE (incredulously):

WHAT?!

BRYANT:

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

SHAKESPEARE and THE OTHERS *look even more amazed.*

BRYANT:

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

SHAKESPEARE shakes his head defiantly.

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 (sceptically):

You must have known what he was planning.

SHAKESPEARE (indignantly):

I did not! I knew that 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 stares down at BRYANT.

SHAKESPEARE:

He misled me. He used my debt to him - a debt I *had* to discharge! - to make me do his bidding.

BRYANT scoffs.

BRYANT:

It must have been a considerable debt.

HEMINGS strides across the stage and stands over BRYANT.

HEMINGS:

It was - and we *all* owed it!

BRYANT (firmly):

I owe *no* man.

HEMINGS:

Oh, no?

He indicates SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

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 all laugh and BRYANT looks a little chastened.

HEMINGS (to ALL THE ACTORS):

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!*

Suddenly A GROUP OF ARMED SOLDIERS enters the theatre, marches forward and stops in front of the stage.

THE ACTORS, who are now all on their feet, stare down at them.

The soldiers' CAPTAIN comes to the front, near 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.

He looks up at THE ACTORS massed onstage.

CAPTAIN:

Choose one of your number to speak on your behalf.

ALL THE ACTORS look around at each other as the CAPTAIN turns away and HIS MEN spread out to block the exits.

SHAKESPEARE walks into the middle of the group of ACTORS.

SHAKESPEARE:

I will do it.

HEMINGS (firmly):

No, Will. You can't.

SHAKESPEARE looks shocked.

SHAKESPEARE:

Why not?

HEMINGS:

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

CONDELL (nodding):

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

HEMINGS nods in agreement.

HEMINGS:

Someone else should speak for us.

CONDELL:

I suggest Augustine.

EVERYONE looks at PHILIPS, who looks terrified.

PHILIPS:

Me? What? *Why?*

CONDELL (smiling broadly):

Because you are the most *innocent*-looking among us!
(*Pause and even wider smile.*) Indeed, you are the *only* innocent-looking one among us!

HEMINGS, BURBAGE and SEVERAL OTHERS laugh.

HEMINGS (to PHILIPS):

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

PHILIPS:

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

CONDELL stares at PHILIPS.

CONDELL:

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

HEMINGS and BURBAGE (together):

Aye.

PHILIPS still looks frightened, so HEMINGS goes over to him.

HEMINGS:

Don't worry. 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 -

He glances at HEMINGS and CONDELL.

SHAKESPEARE:

- omitting *all* mention of Southampton.

HEMINGS and CONDELL both nod in agreement, then HEMINGS comes over and stands right beside SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS (to SHAKESPEARE):

Compose them well. (Pause.) You have never written anything so important!

SHAKESPEARE suddenly looks very nervous - even scared.

19. INT. COURTROOM. DAY.

A fearful-looking PHILIPS stands before THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE and TWO OTHER JUDGES, all of whom are seated.

THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE - a fearsome-looking old man - studies a piece of paper he is holding, then puts it down on the desk.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

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

PHILIPS (nodding quickly):

Yes, my Lord.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE (furiously):

Then you are a *liar* as well as a *traitor*!

PHILIPS (shaking his head):

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.

FIRST JUDGE:

Then why perform the play?

SECOND JUDGE:

Yes - especially such an *inflammatory* play?

PHILIPS:

As I said in my statement, my Lord -

He points at the piece of paper on the desk.

PHILIPS:

- We did it for the *money*. No other reason.

For a moment, ALL THREE JUDGES look at him accusingly.

Then the LORD CHIEF JUSTICE turns and looks at his colleagues.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

Well, he is a *player*.

FIRST JUDGE:

They are *all* players.

SECOND JUDGE:

And players are little more than *whores*! I can well believe that they would do *anything* for money.

They all laugh and PHILIPS smiles uneasily.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

Alright, Mister Philips. At the moment, there is no other evidence linking you and your company to the conspiracy, so for now you are dismissed - *pending* further inquiries.

PHILIPS looks almightily relieved.

PHILIPS:

Thank you, my Lords. Thank you.

He bows, as if he were on stage.

He turns and is about to go out when a MESSENGER enters, carrying a note that he gives to the LORD CHIEF JUSTICE.

THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE looks at it, then at PHILIPS.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

It is for you, Mister Philips.

PHILIPS turns round, looking absolutely dumbfounded.

PHILIPS:

Me, my Lord?

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE (nodding):

That is what I said.

PHILIPS:

But who is it from?

THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE smiles at PHILIPS.

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE:

The Queen!

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

20. INT/EXT. THE STAGE, GLOBE THEATRE. DAY.

ALL THE ACTORS are on stage, looking at PHILIPS questioningly.

HEMINGS:

Well?

PHILIPS:

We are *not* suspected of being part of the conspiracy.

THE ACTORS all sigh with relief - ONE OR TWO even cheer.

SHAKESPEARE:

You must have been a convincing witness, Augustine.

PHILIPS:

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

SHAKESPEARE smiles, looking a little pleased with himself.

CONDELL:

So they were persuaded by the "money" story?

PHILIPS:

Aye. As you thought they would be.

CONDELL (smiling):

Good.

CONDELL also looks pleased with himself and HEMINGS laughs.

HEMINGS:

Thank God we players are of such low repute! They would never have believed us otherwise.

Now EVERYONE laughs, except PHILIPS, which SHAKESPEARE notices.

SHAKESPEARE:

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

PHILIPS takes out the note he had received in the courtroom.

PHILIPS:

Because we have received another commission.

SHAKESPEARE:

What? From who?

PHILIPS (solemnly):

From the Queen!

SHAKESPEARE and ALL THE OTHER ACTORS look at him in amazement.

PHILIPS hands SHAKESPEARE the note and SHAKESPEARE quickly unfurls it as THE OTHERS crowd round, also trying to read it.

HEMINGS:

What is it, Will? What does it say?

SHAKESPEARE:

It says Her Majesty desires that we perform for her.

For a moment, they are all speechless.

HEMINGS:

When?

SHAKESPEARE checks the note again.

SHAKESPEARE:

Tomorrow. (Pause.) The night before Essex's execution.

HEMINGS:

WHAT?!

CONDELL (nervously):

And what play?

SHAKESPEARE takes a final look at the note, then looks up.

SHAKESPEARE:

"Richard the Second".

HEMINGS:

WHAT?!

SHAKESPEARE:

Complete with dethroning scene.

Once again, for a moment there is total, stunned silence.

HEMINGS:

I don't understand. Having *banned* it, why does the Queen want us to perform *"Richard the Second"* - complete with dethroning scene - for *her*?

SHAKESPEARE:

Because she wants *revenge!*

HEMINGS:

"Revenge"?

SHAKESPEARE:

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

SHAKESPEARE and ALL THE ACTORS look horrified.

21. INT. BACKSTAGE AT COURT. NIGHT.

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and CONDELL, made up and in costume for their roles in "Richard", peer out from the "wings" (in reality, the side of a raised platform serving as a "stage").

Their POINT OF VIEW:

Sitting in a high-backed chair in the great hall that is being used for the performance is the QUEEN - ELIZABETH I.

She is surrounded by OFFICIALS, including a thin, bearded, cruel-looking man.

HEMINGS (quietly):

They're all out there - even Lord Cecil himself!

The cruel-looking man - LORD CECIL - turns and looks directly at them, so they quickly duck back into the wings.

SHAKESPEARE looks at HEMINGS and CONDELL - and looks terrified.

SHAKESPEARE:

We should have fled!

HEMINGS:

Where to? The Queen has spies all over England - all over Europe! She would find us wherever we went.

CONDELL:

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

HEMINGS and CONDELL both look at SHAKESPEARE.

HEMINGS:

We must go on.

CONDELL nods.

Finally, SHAKESPEARE nods too.

Then the three of them turn to face THE REST OF THE COMPANY.

THEIR POINT OF VIEW:

THE OTHER PLAYERS, including BURBAGE as Richard and PHILIPS as Bolingbroke, are also made up and in costume, and stare back.

SHAKESPEARE (addressing them all):

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 (surprised):

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 (emphatically):

I do!

HEMINGS (equally emphatically):

No! 'Tis we who owe *you* - our careers, 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 -

He looks out at the great hall.

HEMINGS:

- About to perform for the Queen of England herself!
(*Pause.*) That's something a mere *grocer* -

CONDELL:

Or *fishmonger*!

HEMINGS:

- Could only *dream* of!

He smiles at SHAKESPEARE and SHAKESPEARE smiles back.

HEMINGS:

Take your positions, Men.

ALL THE ACTORS immediately stand to attention.

HEMINGS:

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

SOME ACTORS, especially the younger ones, look tearful.

HEMINGS:

So let us make it a memorable one -

SHAKESPEARE (interrupting him):

- 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 and THE ACTORS who are not in the first scene take a step back, leaving those who are - including SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS and BURBAGE - standing in the wings, looking frightened.

Then, as one, they walk onstage.

22. INT. THE "STAGE", COURT. NIGHT.

THE ACTORS stand on the "stage" and look out at the audience.

Their POINT OF VIEW:

THE COURT, with THE QUEEN at its centre, looks back at them.

For a moment, THE ACTORS seem to be frozen with fear.

Then BURBAGE - the consummate professional - begins to speak.

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 continues to speak, SHAKESPEARE stares at THE QUEEN.

His POINT OF VIEW:

THE QUEEN is old, perhaps even close to death, with an incredibly wrinkled face, but she is wearing so much make-up - even more than THE ACTORS themselves - that the effect is quite incongruous, like the presence of lipstick on a corpse.

SHAKESPEARE is still staring at her when he becomes aware that THE OTHER ACTORS, including BURBAGE, are staring at him: he looks puzzled, then realises why they are looking at him.

Finally, remembering his line, he speaks.

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..."

23. INT. "THE STAGE", COURT. NIGHT.

BURBAGE (as Richard) is centre-stage, surrounded by COURTIERS.

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 - "

24. INT. "THE WINGS", THE COURT. NIGHT.

SHAKESPEARE is watching the QUEEN.

THE QUEEN is staring at BURBAGE and as he says the next line, "All murdered", she nods and mouths the words along with him, so that they seem to be coming out of her mouth.

SHAKESPEARE is so surprised he almost falls forward onto the stage in shock, but just manages to steady himself in time.

25. INT. "THE STAGE", THE COURT. NIGHT.

It is the dethroning scene and PHILIPS (as Bolingbroke) holds the crown and sceptre that BURBAGE (as Richard) has given him.

BURBAGE (as King Richard):

"What more remains?"

26. INT. "THE WINGS", THE COURT. NIGHT.

HEMINGS whispers in SHAKESPEARE's ear.

HEMINGS:

Indeed! "What more remains" of us, once the play ends?

SHAKESPEARE looks at him fearfully.

27. INT. "THE STAGE", THE COURT. THE NIGHT.

BURBAGE (as Richard) is in a coffin in the centre 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 his "LORDS", who carry the coffin containing BURBAGE (as Richard).

28. INT. "THE WINGS", THE COURT. NIGHT.

As soon as BURBAGE is carried into the wings, he leaps out of the coffin and looks at SHAKESPEARE imploringly.

BURBAGE:

Well...?

SHAKESPEARE (confused):

"Well" what?

BURBAGE looks at him in shock, then looks out at THE QUEEN.

BURBAGE:

Did she like it?

SHAKESPEARE looks at him in disgust.

SHAKESPEARE:

Honestly, Richard. You and your ego! How could that possibly matter now?

BURBAGE (as if explaining to an idiot):

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

SHAKESPEARE looks unconvinced by this argument and turns round.

He sees that THE QUEEN is sitting in her chair, not moving.

Her OFFICIALS, including LORD CECIL, are all staring at her, obviously waiting to follow her lead.

Slowly, as if it was an effort almost beyond her, she lifts her spindly, wrinkled arms.

Then, finally, she begins to clap.

It is quiet, almost tentative, but it is undeniably applause.

Seeing - and hearing - this, THE REST OF THE COURT follow suit and begin to applaud, much more loudly.

SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE look at each other in disbelief.

Then HEMINGS virtually pushes them towards the stage.

HEMINGS:

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

SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE exchange a final, startled look, then quickly join THE OTHER ACTORS as they go back onstage.

29. INT. "THE STAGE", THE COURT. NIGHT.

ALL THE ACTORS, with SHAKESPEARE and BURBAGE centre-stage, bow deeply as the applause continues.

As they do so, they continue to exchange looks of surprise.

Suddenly THE QUEEN stops applauding and so - instantaneously - does THE REST OF THE COURT.

THE ACTORS, along with THE OFFICIALS, all stare at her: they are all obviously wondering what she will say, or do, next.

There is a long - an agonisingly long - pause.

Then, slowly, she raises a solitary finger.

She opens her mouth to speak and when she does speak, it is with a quiet, almost inaudible voice: if everyone else in the hall were not silent, it would be impossible to hear her.

QUEEN:

Master Shakespeare...

With an almost skeletal finger, she points at SHAKESPEARE.

For a moment, SHAKESPEARE looks stunned, but then - silently urged on by THE OTHER ACTORS - he finds his voice.

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, your Majesty?

QUEEN:

Come here.

With the same skeletal finger, she beckons him forward.

SHAKESPEARE looks around nervously at THE OTHER ACTORS, especially HEMINGS, but again they all silently urge him on.

He moves forward, slowly, then steps down off the "stage".

He walks towards THE QUEEN, until he is right in front of her, and finally kneels down in front of her.

SHAKESPEARE:

Your Majesty.

QUEEN (even more quietly):

Closer.

Looking even more surprised, SHAKESPEARE stands up and moves towards her, until he is literally standing right beside her.

Once again, she beckons him to come closer.

He leans down towards her, until his ear is beside her mouth: when she speaks, only he can hear her.

QUEEN:

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

SHAKESPEARE replies with a whisper as he is so close to her.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you, your Majesty. You are too kind.

She looks up at him pointedly.

QUEEN:

I know!

SHAKESPEARE is almost taken aback, then quickly regains his composure and leans in even closer to listen to her.

QUEEN:

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

SHAKESPEARE goes to nod, but stops: his head is so close to THE QUEEN's that if he nods he will hit her head with his.

Instead, he just replies, quietly.

SHAKESPEARE:

Yes, your Majesty. Of course.

QUEEN:

Good. And one final thing...

He leans in even closer, so that he is almost touching her.

She looks up at him again - directly into his eyes.

QUEEN:

I am Richard the Second. Know ye not that?

SHAKESPEARE looks absolutely astonished.

Slowly, so as to avoid touching her head, he shakes his head.

SHAKESPEARE:

No, your Majesty. I did not know.

She nods, slightly.

QUEEN:

I am.

And with that, she half-sits, half-slumps back in her chair and casually flicks a finger to dismiss SHAKESPEARE.

Instantly, he begins withdrawing, bowing as he goes.

SHAKESPEARE:

Thank you, your Majesty. Thank you.

He continues bowing all the way back to the stage.

He bumps into the stage, then carefully climbs backwards onto it, all the while looking at THE QUEEN and bowing.

Once on the stage, and still bowing, he begins moving slowly toward the wings, followed by ALL THE OTHER ACTORS.

30. INT. "BACKSTAGE", THE COURT. NIGHT.

As they come off stage, HEMINGS, BURBAGE and THE OTHER ACTORS all look at SHAKESPEARE questioningly.

HEMINGS:

What did she say?

SHAKESPEARE stops walking and stares at him.

SHAKESPEARE:

She said she enjoyed the play.

HEMINGS:

Yes?

SHAKESPEARE:

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

HEMINGS (nodding):

Yes?

SHAKESPEARE:

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

HEMINGS:

WHAT?!

HE and THE OTHER ACTORS look at SHAKESPEARE questioningly.

HEMINGS:

What did she *mean*?

SHAKESPEARE (shaking his head):

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

Now he looks at them all intently.

SHAKESPEARE:

Now I suggest that we all "exit" *immediately*, before she changes her mind and has us *killed*!

HEMINGS:

Agreed!

ALL THE PLAYERS quickly begin changing out of their costumes.

31. EXT. PALACE GROUNDS. NIGHT.

SHAKESPEARE, HEMINGS, CONDELL and ALL THE OTHER PLAYERS leave the Palace through a side door and enter the grounds smiling and laughing - they are obviously delirious with relief.

Suddenly, they all stop laughing and stop walking.

Their POINT OF VIEW:

Straight ahead, a gallows is being erected by several WORKMEN.

THE PLAYERS, including SHAKESPEARE, all stare at it.

HEMINGS:

That must be for Essex.

SHAKESPEARE:

Aye. And Southampton.

They all continue to stare at the gallows.

HEMINGS:

But why here? Why not the Tower?

SHAKESPEARE (ruefully):

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

As they watch, a rope is slung over the top of the gallows.

They watch it being put in place, then tightened, before walking on in silence towards the palace gates.

32. EXT. OUTSIDE THE PALACE GATES. NIGHT.

THE PLAYERS walk away from the Palace, watched suspiciously by THE GUARDS standing at the gates.

For a few moments, they continue to walk in complete silence.

Then, BURBAGE turns and looks at SHAKESPEARE.

BURBAGE:

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

SHAKESPEARE looks at him questioningly.

SHAKESPEARE:

What would?

BURBAGE:

This - this night, this whole story!

SHAKESPEARE stops walking - forcing EVERYONE ELSE behind him to stop walking too - and looks at BURBAGE in amazement, prompting him to stop walking too.

HEMINGS looks at BURBAGE and shakes his head.

HEMINGS:

Not in our lifetime.

CONDELL:

And certainly not in the *Queen's!*

BURBAGE considers this for a moment, then nods in agreement.

BURBAGE:

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

They all consider this for a moment, then nod in agreement.

SHAKESPEARE looks at BURBAGE, then looks back at the Palace.

SHAKESPEARE:

'Tis a plot more fanciful than any I wrote.

For a moment, ALL THE PLAYERS stare at SHAKESPEARE.

Then he walks on and they follow, heading away from the Palace and towards The Globe, the straw roof of which is just visible in the distance.

Fade to:

BLACK.

The screen remains black for a moment.

Then a caption appears: "ESSEX WAS EXECUTED FOR TREASON. SOUTHAMPTON HAD HIS SENTENCE COMMUTED TO LIFE IMPRISONMENT - IN THE TOWER."

It fades away and is replaced by another caption: "QUEEN ELIZABETH DIED TWO YEARS LATER AND WAS SUCCEEDED ON THE THRONE BY KING JAMES THE SIXTH OF SCOTLAND, WHO BECAME KING JAMES THE FIRST OF ENGLAND."

This fades and is replaced by another caption: "JAMES BECAME SUCH AN ADMIRER OF SHAKESPEARE THAT HE BECAME THE PATRON OF THE COMPANY, WHICH MEANT THEY FINALLY ENJOYED SOME FINANCIAL SECURITY."

This fades and is replaced by another caption: "DURING THE NEXT TEN YEARS, WHILE HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE KING'S MEN, SHAKESPEARE WROTE HIS GREATEST PLAYS."

This fades and is replaced by another caption: **"THESE INCLUDE THE FOUR GREAT TRAGEDIES - "HAMLET", "KING LEAR", "MACBETH" AND "OTHELLO" - ALL OF WHICH FEATURE A PLOT AGAINST A KING OR ANOTHER LEADER."**

A final caption appears: **"END OF PART I".**

Fade out to:

BLACK.