

SHAKESPEARE 'S FIRE

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Written by

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Based on an original story

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SHAKESPEARE'S FIRE

SYNOPSIS

SHAKESPEARE'S FIRE is a dream of his last days in London. He has lost his power to create new work, lost his genius.

He lives in the Cripplegate area of London, in the shadow of the church of St. Giles, the patron saint of cripples, lepers and beggars, and he lives out his days mostly drunk, in the thrall of secret music, looking, without success, in a boozy haze, for ways and means to use the English language to new purpose, for the sustaining strength to complete a work.

During a performance of "**All is True**", better known as "**The History of Henry VIII**", on June 29th, 1613, a gunpowder "squib" that was used to create the sound of a cannon announcing the arrival of King Henry at a banquet fizzled and started a fire that burned The Globe Theatre to the ground.

The play, allegedly a collaboration between William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, was one of three the two men had worked on together. The other two plays, "**Cardenio**" and "**The Two Noble Kinsmen**", have been lost to history, but the text of "**Henry VIII**" survived. It shows little of the genius that Shakespeare invested in any other play he wrote.

After the fire, Shakespeare returned to his home town, Stratford-Upon-Avon in Warwickshire, and never wrote another dramatic work or poem. If he did, there is no record of it. He died three years later on the 23rd of April, 1616 after a drunken binge with two friends from London, Ben Johnson and Michael Drayton.

So, what was going on in the last year of Shakespeare's life? He was 53 or 54 years old and still a member of The King's Men, a group of actors and producers with whom he had been working for decades. His best work was long behind him and the last three works he was involved in were in collaboration with Fletcher. He was, in the context of the day, a wealthy man, and a gentlemen under a Coat of Arms. And yet, in his day, he disappeared, only to be resurrected later.

CHARACTERS

William Shakespeare - a writer

Thomas Campion * - a musician

The King's Men

- Richard Burbage (Also "Big Dick")
- Cuthbert Burbage (Also "Curly")
- John Heminges (Also "Jack" And "Veteran Harold")
- Henry Condell (Also "Hank")
- John Fletcher (also "VETERAN HAROLD")

Rose -a publican

Lady Emilia Bassano - The "Dark Lady"

Calbano - her servant

The Veteran (also "John Fletcher")

The Dead Parrots' Society

- Big Dick (Also "Richard Burbage")
- Curly (Also "Cuthbert Burbage")
- Jack (Also "John Heminges")
- Hank (Also "Henry Condell")

As many supernumeraries as can be afforded for street and theatre scenes.

*** THOMAS CAMPION'S ROLE**

Campion, a musician and composer, was a contemporary of William Shakespeare's. In our play, he is on stage whenever Shakespeare is playing his instrument - a lute or mandolin - sometimes reflecting Shakespeare's mental state, sometimes running contrary or ironically. His is a "character" that can be dispensed with if money's an issue for those mounting the play, but if he's done right, he can add depth and piquancy to the drama. What he plays can be what Campion wrote, but his music can also be original.

FADE IN:

ACT ONE

SCENE 1 - EXT. HAMPSTEAD HEATH - MAY 1613 - DAWN

Off stage the sound of the King's Men have arrived in horse-drawn wagons. As they come to a halt, men shout and talk as they get down and shake out their bones after a long journey.

Silhouetted against a rising dawn light, enter **RICHARD BURBAGE** from upstage. Now in his late middle age, he swaggers like the famous actor he is. A few steps in, he calls back to the others.

RICHARD BURBAGE

One of you men put some heat under the porridge pot. And feed the horses, goddamn you all.

He walks front and center.

RICHARD

London! From here, a place of beauty.

Also from upstage, enter his brother **CUTHBERT BURBAGE**, also in middle age, who marches towards Richard. He turns toward upstage and yells out one more order.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

And wake the dead!
(beat)
Mornin' brother.

RICHARD BURBAGE

The sun will burn off that fog. Two more hours we'll be in its muck and mire.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

And stink.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Aye, that too. Give thanks to the accommodating human nose.

From upstage, enter **JOHN HEMINGES**, older than Richard and Cuthbert, another actor in the King's Men company.

HEMINGES

These old bones of mine have been cruelly jostled, Richard, thanks to your impatience.

RICHARD BURBAGE

But, on moonlit roads, Heminges. We travelled *when the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees and they did make no noise.*

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

He means to say, in all that quiet he could hear the sound of London money jangling once again in his near-empty pockets.

RICHARD BURBAGE

We are a plundering force, wherever we go, in the Provinces or there in the pestilential city.

HEMINGES

He means to say that London crowds are manifold, and many pockets are easier to pick by artful means than those in the Provincial towns behind us.

Enter **JOHN FLETCHER**, a young playwright, from upstage. He joins the others as they look at London in the distance.

FLETCHER

Look, there. The Globe rises above the foggy tenements.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Our one and only world, young Fletcher.

Enter **HENRY CONDELL**, another middle-aged man, who walks toward his friends from upstage. Other members of the company emerge from upstage and mill about behind the main players downstage. Women actors are obviously dressed as men.

CONDELL

Our Will's awake, bird-chirping while he pisses on the breakfast fire.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Then gentlemen, let us begin our descent.

Cuthbert, Condell and Heminges exit in the direction from whence they came.

FLETCHER

A word, Richard.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Be quick.

FLETCHER

We promised the new play would be done in time for our return to London. It's far from that. Shakespeare's let us down.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Careful.

FLETCHER

I can finish it but only if I do the rest myself.

RICHARD BURBAGE

No, John. Not you. Let the master put down the final draft.

FLETCHER

It won't get done. And you know it.

Enter Shakespeare upstage, a little wobbly, and makes his way downstage, followed by **THOMAS CAMPION** playing on a lute or mandolin.

Fletcher sees Shakespeare coming and decides to take his leave. He averts his eyes from Shakespeare as makes an upstage exit.

SHAKESPEARE

That...

(pointing at London)

... is a surprise. Did we not sup at Birnam Wood just last night?

RICHARD BURBAGE

You do amuse, William.

SHAKESPEARE

At Bosworth's Field near Liecester then?

RICHARD BURBAGE

Really, you are quite mad.

SHAKESPEARE

We were on our way to.... Where
were we going?

RICHARD BURBAGE

We had camped beside the road to
Oxford Town...

SHAKESPEARE

... to play before the poncey dons
and their students for whom
ignorance is bliss. But, behold,
London.

RICHARD BURBAGE

We had a meal. We drank. We sang.
But, not for you the bawdy tunes
that make us merry.

SHAKESPEARE

Not me. Not me these days.

RICHARD BURBAGE

No, so you rose in the fire flicker
and wobbled to our horses where
they nickered, then whisper-hummed
the sainted Gregory's chants.

SHAKESPEARE

To lull them for they are terrified
with thoughts of London noise.
But, when was London voted on?

RICHARD BURBAGE

After you dropped in a forest of
equine legs and snored yourself to
sleep. Heminges and Condell
carried you to your wagon, but
while they did, the road filled-up
with ten hundred people, all London-
bound. And more and more came
trundling down the roads, the surest
sign the recent plague is all
played-out. So we go too, because
we can earn our daily bread at The
Globe far faster than we can out
here in this benighted countryside.

SHAKESPEARE

Our horses would sooner go to
Oxford and eat apples from the tree
of knowledge.

RICHARD BURBAGE

The horses? They will go where
they are driven.

Richard turns away from Shakespeare and begins to walk
upstage. Then he turns to face Shakespeare.

RICHARD

As will you. And Johnny Fletcher,
by the way, will finish Henry
Eight.

SHAKESPEARE

So, you'll have a play to mount.
But, Fletcher's play. Not mine.

Richard exits, irritated.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Pageantry you'll have. Oh yes, as
much as Fletcher can stomp across
the stage. Grandeur? Only what
the costumer can stitch from
Fletcher's rags. Hautboys and
trumpets? Noise to fill the
rafters of the brain. And lest we
forget, cannon shots that Fletcher
intends will bring down the house.
And so they might. So, what good
are words from me? Mere words.

Shakespeare and Campion exit.

SCENE 2 - A BUSY LONDON STREET - AFTERNOON - SAME DAY

In the Cripplegate area of London, the Foxe and Speed ale
house, St. Giles church and graveyard, and various
dilapidated streets loom over a small square.

Enter beautiful but middle-aged **LADY BASSANO** in tired robes,
just returned from Italy, followed by **CALBANO**, a lithe, but
sweating, youth who carries a sheathed stiletto from his
belt. He labours to pull a cart overloaded with her
suitcases.

Calbano stops to rest. After a few paces she turns around to
watch him and gives him a scolding, impatient look. She
walks to him.

CALBANO

Perdonami, signora. Sto facendo
del mio meglio.

LADY BASSANO
 (Italian accent)
 English please, Calbano. As I have
 taught you.

Calbano stops.

LADY BASSANO (CONT'D)
 It's not far now. Avanziamo!

The begin to move forward again, with Calbano breathing hard.

CALBANO
 (halting English)
 Jack and Jill went up a hill...

Calbano stops again, and again she urges him on.

CALBANO (CONT'D)
 A little water, Signora.

LADY BASSANO
 Water? No. No. No.

CALBANO
 A drop.

LADY BASSANO
 Even a drop of English water will
 kill you.

CALBANO
 No? Un po 'di vino, forse?
 Signora...?

LADY BASSANO
 English wine. It is oxymoronic
 swill.

CALBANO
 Signora?

LADY BASSANO
 Never drink English wine. Ever.
 Beer, ale, mead. Those are the
 water-made choices of the English.

CALBANO
 In Italiano, per favore.

LADY BASSANO

Piss, sewer water and codswallop.
Now, you could walk into that
establishment there and slake your
thirst. But, Calbano, up there,
not far, is my house where you may
have a dish of fava beans and a
nice Chianti.

Calbano nods in the direction of Lady Bassano's house and
picks up the shaft begins to pull the cart.

Enter Shakespeare, a little shaky, with Condell and Heminges
on either side, each carrying a case under this arm. Campion
follows plucking at his instrument.

Lady Bassano stops abruptly and watches them, causing Calbano
to come to a sudden, jolting stop. She quickly steps to the
side of the cart to hide herself from Shakespeare and
company.

Shakespeare stops near the front door of a house.

SHAKESPEARE

Here my friends. This is Montjoy's
house, my lodging place.

CONDELL

You live here? Did you not
purchase a home in Blackfriar's,
Will?

SHAKESPEARE

I did.

Lady Bassano pulls up her hood then edges closer to the men
so she can hear them. Calbano climbs to the top of the cases
and reclines as he watches scene unfold.

HEMINGES

Of which you have taken
possession...?

SHAKESPEARE

I have, in deed, but not in words.

CONDELL

He flips a phrase like it's a coin.

SHAKESPEARE

I mean to say, I have not stood
within my Blackfriar rooms and
uttered the incantations that
declare one's house a home.

(MORE)

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Nor have I taken a mighty shit in its bunghole, either, to seal the deal.

HEMINGES

Here you live amidst the lowest of the low, a clan of thieves, cut-purses, cons, whores...

Lady Bassano gets even closer.

SHAKESPEARE

Ah, you see, Heminges, Cripplegate has seized me as its hostage and will not let me go until I pay its price. St. Giles there has embraced me in the thrall of its doom-filled shadows. It's bells call out the hours to tell us all that paradise is truly lost. And so I stay here, though every night a host of bugs and vermin chew on my mortal edges. It's they that have tossed and turned me out of bed and sent me scurrying to my table, to the candlelight where in years past I found illumination, though in it's flicker, not much these days. None at all, if truth be told.

CONDELL

Try writing in the sober light of day.

HEMINGES

God's sake, Condell.

SHAKESPEARE

(irritated)

You try. Day or night. Or any other time Calliope turns her tricks within your speechless actor's brain.

HEMINGES

He apologizes.

CONDELL

I suppose you must do what you must do.

SHAKESPEARE

(agitated)

Now, with thanks to you both for
porting me here I say good night to
your good day. I must rest.

Shakespeare picks up his cases, enters Montjoy's house and
closes the door behind him. Campion drifts into the shadows.
Lady Bassano steps closer to Condell and Heminges.

HEMINGES

(to Condell)

Is not St. Giles the patron saint
of lepers, beggars... and, erm,
cripples?

CONDELL

Aye, and of sleeping children
caught in nighttime terrors.

LADY BASSANO

And of wayward, plagiarizing
playwrights too. His new remit.

HEMINGES

Lady, you affront our friend.

CONDELL

While you hide your face, no less.

She pulls down her hood.

HEMINGES

Lady Bassano?!

Calbano jumps down from the wagon and watches more intently,
but his mien is now more studied and protective, his stance
straighter.

LADY BASSANO

I have just returned. From Italy.
Firenze. From sunshine.

CONDELL

Why?

LADY BASSANO

To repair my house, which has lain
broken these many years.

HEMINGES

We passed it just the other day.
But, lady, a few nails will not
suffice.

CONDELL

But, a few screws might.

LADY BASSANO

(laughs)

Hah! Indeed, indeed, Henry
Condell. You've lost your teetch
but not your bite.

She strides away and begins walking up the street. Calbano
grabs the shafts of the cart and follows her straining as he
pulls the cart. They exit.

HEMINGES

Shall we tell Will she's back?

CONDELL

Not now. But, the Burbage brothers
should be warned that she's
returned, no doubt to re-assert
herself in our affairs.

The two men exit.

Momentarily, Shakespeare opens the door, sticks his head out
to be sure his friends have gone. He makes his way quickly
across the street to the Foxe and Speed. Campion emerges
from the shadows and rushes to follow him through the door
that he closes behind him.

SCENE 3 - OUTSIDE THE GLOBE THEATRE - EARLY MORNING

Londoners change the stage set from Cripplegate to just
outside The Globe. Cuthbert arrives at the steps of theatre
then manhandles a couple of hung-over street people to clear
the doors.

One ambles off, but the second, whose left arm has been
amputated, stumbles and nearly falls into the street. He
pulls a knife and quickly returns to Cuthbert and wields the
knife in his face. Cuthbert laughs.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Say what you want to say veteran
Harold.

VETERAN HAROLD

I want to gut you, truth be told -
to see you act the dying man.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Me now, but on any given day, and
any and all about you. Is it not
so?

VETERAN HAROLD

Aye.

(beat)

Aye. I do. One by bloody one.
Pile them up here on the steps of
The Globe and make a fire of their
bones.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

There'd be some drama in that, Sir,
but killing everyone would leave
you - and The King's Men - without
an audience. Hold out your hand.

Cuthbert reaches into his purse. VETERAN HAROLD tucks his
knife under the armpit of his left arm stump and holds out
his right hand. Cuthbert drops a few coins into it.

VETERAN HAROLD

*The quality of mercy is not
strained. If droppeth as the
gentle rain from heaven...*

In the background, Richard makes his way through the street.
VETERAN HAROLD clenches the coins Cuthbert gave him, uses a
couple of fingers to tug his forelock and then goes off.

People on the street call out to Richard as he makes his way.

STREET PERSON 2

Something wicked this way comes.

RICHARD BURBAGE

*By the pricking of my thumbs it
does!*

STREET PERSON 3

*Life's but a walking shadow, Mr.
Burbage...*

RICHARD BURBAGE

*Yours is a tale told by an idiot,
good friend!*

STREET PERSON 4

*The evil that men do lives after
them...*

RICHARD BURBAGE

*There is nothing either good or bad
but thinking makes it so.*

Richard reaches the steps of The Globe with the street people gathering round. He turns to face them.

RICHARD

Today my brother and I, and all the
randy players of The King's Men
begin the preparation of a
spectacle unseen in these parts
before, the History of Henry Eight.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Save a shilling! We take the stage
a short fortnight from now.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Save two and bring a friend. Watch
us enact Mr. Shakespeare's take on
the subtle machinations of the bulb-
nosed, red-robed Wolsey in the
court of our late-beloved King,
Henry Octo. I swear to you my
friends, that in this play, all is
true! I shall play that King,
whilst Henry Condell shall fill the
slaptoed walking boots of Cardinal
Wolsey who shall do his cunning
best to undo His Majesty in the
name of Wolsey's obstreperous,
Almighty God.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

There will be cannon shot and
trumpets, masked courtesans who
shall dance with heaving bosoms
under the light of a hundred
torches.

RICHARD BURBAGE

And, good brother?

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

A swarthy, sweaty, surly, Scottish
executioner shall let fall his
bright-honed blade upon the hairy
necks of many noble men, and...

RICHARD BURBAGE

... he shall go down on queenly
beauty too, for Queen Catherine
shall give head to her rigid and
florid King.

The crowd roars their approval.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Now, be off. We've work to do.

The crowd disperses in good humour. Richard pulls Cuthbert
aside.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Last night I read Fletcher's work.
The meat of it, he brags, is his.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Good?

RICHARD BURBAGE

Not good. By no means good. Not
what we got from Will when he was
breathing fire. But, the engine of
our salvation may be this.
Fletcher has caught the over-heated
spirit of these changing times.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Will we make our money back?

RICHARD BURBAGE

These days the people have an
appetite for bang and flash, and
Fletcher has laid out a meal I'm
sure will satisfy.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Thank God, for that. For we must
fill the house eight days a week to
pay our costs, otherwise we're
bankrupts in money, not just in
art.

(beat)

Did Will sign off? We need his
name on our bill of fare.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Not yet, but, I'll see he does.

They exit into the theatre.

SCENE 4 - OUTSIDE THE FOXE AND SPEED - LATE MORNING

The scene reverts to the street outside the Foxe and Speed.

ROSE THORNE, owner of the Foxe and Speed, emerges from her ale house carrying a small table which she sets down near her door. As various denizens of the area fill the street she goes back in then re-emerges with a couple of stools that she sets down near the table.

Enter Lady Bassano tiptoeing through shit, piss and garbage, with Calbano holding her train, likewise trying to place his feet to avoid the muck. She stops in front of the pub and waits for Rose to see her.

ROSE

Oy. So, you got my message? But, memory serves, M'Lady, it was last night you was sent for.

LADY BASSANO

I am not accustomed to coming when someone squawks, and Cripplegate is dangerous even in the day.

ROSE

But, here you are, cat-curious, M'Lady.

LADY BASSANO

Your man said I must come to answer the call of an upstart crow.

ROSE

Don't pretend you don't know the man himself. But, let me tell how it went last night. The Dead Parrots, as they call themselves, all in their cups, I grant you, could see the great man was sad. Sad as soap. Abject in his disconsolation is how I'd put it, for there he perched upon his customary stool, chin propped upon his hands, elbows on my foamy bar. And then Big Dick put it to him. Why the tears old boy? Why so lachrymose? Well, he had not by then quite drunk his fill, so he answered as he often does by waxing poetic, this time about some swart woman who speaks a bastard Latin, fallen out of heaven into London on bristling wings.

(MORE)

ROSE (CONT'D)

That's how he described her. "Oh, hair of wire, black and curled, I'm still entangled in her world". And then he said I am nought but an upstart crow. But what all-seeing poet does not caw out his pain?

LADY BASSANO

You assumed he spoke of me?

CALBANO

Deduzione incredibile!

Lady Bassano shoots Calbano a withering glance to shut him up.

ROSE

No, my lady. He did not say your name. Here's how I sussed it out. I filled his jar again and let him wallow awhile longer in the moat of his self-pity, like the good muse I am...

LADY BASSANO

Muse? You?

CALBANO

Madre di Dio!

ROSE

Oh, yes, M'Lady. One of you lot. His sonnets are not lost on me. "The Dark Lady?" whispers I into the hair of his ears, all confidential like. A guess it was by a reader of his sonnet sighs. Got someone lurking in the shadows do you, Will? He raised his head saw through his rapid-drying eyes that I was only asking, not accusing, with him a married man and all. Maybe, someone from the unlit past whom you'd rather not remember? That set him mumbling to this effect, repeating - as he does these days - "Past is prologue. Past is prologue".

LADY BASSANO

And so it is. And so it is.

CALBANO

Il passato è nel futuro?

LADY BASSANO

I take it he finally blurted it out. My name I mean.

ROSE

Cried it out, M'Lady, like a Phoenix flying from a burning tree. But, not til I had the boys carry him to the loft upstairs and lay him down on the straw up there, and just before he fell into a masturbating dream he prayed your name and called you forth. "Emilia. Emilia".

LADY BASSANO

But just said my Christian name?

ROSE

Then he babbled in Italian. That was the clue that broke the code.

LADY BASSANO

Can't be. A mean cat always licks with its mother tongue.

CALBANO

Codice sogno?

LADY BASSANO

So, you sent a man to disrupt my sleep with Shakespeare's hoots.

ROSE

We women know what a man desires.

LADY BASSANO

Until I am wanted in reality, I will not answer his dreamtime knocks.

She turns away and exits without watching her step, although Calbano, who is more or less pulled by her train, still tries to avoid stepping in shit.

Some moments pass, then suddenly, Campion bursts through the pub door, his instrument in hand, and stumbles into the street. The church bells strike the hour of 2 PM, and shake him out of his stupor. He plays.

Momentarily, Shakespeare enters from the same door, also the worse for wear. He stretches in the sunlight. Shakespeare sniffs something in the air and, as Campion plays, rises to his tip toes and takes a whiff.

Rose enters from the pub and watches.

ROSE
She's long gone by now.

SHAKESPEARE
The whiff of her remains.

ROSE
Now there's an entendre doubled-up.
Hair of dog, then? Take a stool.
I'll fetch your jar.

SHAKESPEARE
I must decline, Mrs. Thorne. Brush
of teeth. Comb of hair. Gird of
loins.

ROSE
Business is it?

SHAKESPEARE
Aye. The very heart and soul of
it: money. As to Lady B. - she'll
be back. We can count on that.

Rose exits through the pub. Shakespeare crosses the street and bangs on the door to his lodging house. When it opens, he takes a quick but searching look around the street, then enters. Campion follows him in and closes the door behind them.

SCENE 5 - THE GLOBE - STAGE - LATER

The Burbage brothers enter with Fletcher, in animated and irritated discussion. Richard carries a manuscript in hand.

FLETCHER
The answer to my question, then?

CUTHBERT BURBAGE
Question? It is a demand you force
upon us.

FLETCHER
(indicating the empty
theatre)
I can fill this place.

Shakespeare enters stage left, but hangs in the shadows and eavesdrops on his colleagues.

FLETCHER (CONT'D)

They all want to see the new, new thing, not even the new old thing which Shakespeare might produce were he to, well, ever walk upright again.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

You will *never* do what William has - and does... and does!

FLETCHER

True. But, I can do what I can do as you will see once Henry Eight is on the boards. Fill this place.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Your proposals been rehearsed. Say again what do you propose.

FLETCHER

From hence forth that I shall be The King's Men's man. The Company's playwright. One and only.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

You cannot be serious?

FLETCHER

And, you shall give me a share in the enterprise equal to that of every man in the Company, including our playwright emeritus, of course. I do respect my elders.

RICHARD BURBAGE

(angrily)
Give you!?

FLETCHER

You know I have no ready cash. What I have is the mind and means by which our troupe shall continue to extract profit from my comedy and drama. Box office is my singular concern.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Profit! Hah!

FLETCHER

No more collaborations. I'll not be taken under in Shakespeare's tide of undertowing time.

Shakespeare comes out of hiding.

SHAKESPEARE

Though I am not naturally honest, I am sometimes so by chance.

(beat)

I may be drowning friends, but I do not wish myself to be diluted.

RICHARD BURBAGE

If your writing days are truly done, Will, we can reprise your old works. Fill the hall again...

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

And again and again and again.

Fletcher scoffs.

SHAKESPEARE

Let us make a bargain, Mr. Fletcher. You may buy my share.

RICHARD BURBAGE

By God, Will, we will not allow it!

SHAKESPEARE

It is mine to sell. He says he has no ready cash. But, Henry Eight will soon make his commanding presence here. It's your play, Fletcher, I readily concede.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

No sir. It is your play. Both.

SHAKESPEARE

My share for twenty guineas. What say you?

FLETCHER

Twenty! You mark it up like a Venetian merchant!

SHAKESPEARE

You say you have no ready cash, Fletcher. Pay me once the run of Henry VIII is done, however long it goes.

FLETCHER

I... I...

RICHARD BURBAGE

(to Shakespeare
confidentially)

You put him utterly at risk, Will.
He's young.

SHAKESPEARE

Have you insufficient faith in the
pyrotechnics you espouse?

FLETCHER

It is what the people want. But...

SHAKESPEARE

I agree. Words are dead, crucified
by time itself.

RICHARD BURBAGE

You dare blaspheme? Here, William?
Here?

SHAKESPEARE

One thing I never doubted when I
was young as you are now, was the
plenipotent and protean force of my
imagination, and never once, as it
propelled me forth, and swung me
round the starlit heavens where its
engines burned me up, did I
contemplate the risk of failure.
Did not care then. Do not now
care.

(beat)

I should not say this, but these
men know I want for modesty. I
learned to laugh, Fletcher, at my
little self as I cranked out my
verse, but in imitation of those
ancient gods that laughed at
humankind. Our folly. But...that
was then. Now, I know my wings
were made of wax.

FLETCHER

I'll take the deal. The brothers
Burbage stand as witness.

SHAKESPEARE

Well then, my share moves to you
this very instance. Record that in
your ledger, Richard.

(MORE)

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

But, as to the purchase price, you are now in my debt, which on the very night the play has had its last, will fall due.

They shake hands.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

I hold it fit that we shake hands and part. Erm... Something, something.

FLETCHER

For every man has business and desire.

Shakespeare exits.

FLETCHER (CONT'D)

'Twas easily done. And, in mitigation of the risk now taken on, I consent to Shakespeare's name going on our posters.

Fletcher exits.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Did you notice Fletcher wince when Shakespeare gripped his hand?

RICHARD BURBAGE

Fletcher does not comprehend the power reposed in Shakespeare's hand.

They exit.

SCENE 6 - LONDON STREET - LATE AFTERNOON

Condell and Heminges enter and walk toward the Foxe and Speed.

CONDELL

He will be very pleased to hear our proposal.

HEMINGES

Let us be direct. Put it to him clearly.

CONDELL

Speak to his advantages, not ours.

HEMINGES

Unless, of course, the black dog
has got its teeth into
Shakespeare's bony, stool-flat ass.

CONDELL

If so, we'll try another day.

Condell and Heminges go into the Foxe and Speed but as they go in they are seen by Lady Bassano who arrives outside, followed by Calbano. They can hear the sound of a noisy ruckus inside the pub.

LADY BASSANO

Mr. Shakespeare is bringing the
place down upon their heads.

Calbano pulls his stiletto and looks to Lady Bassano for permission to go in.

LADY BASSANO (CONT'D)

Put it away, Calbano. This is
London, not Napoli.

He hesitates, but does.

The door to the pub bursts open and Condell and Heminges stumble out, pushed by an angry Rose.

ROSE

Now bugger off you two before you
come to harm.

CONDELL

We merely wished to...

She pokes a finger in Heminges' breast bone.

ROSE

Rule one, rule two and rule three:
There's no talkin' during the
proceedings of The Dead Parrot's
Society. He himself wrote the
constitution.

HEMINGES

We mistook the silence...

CONDELL

...for an opportunity to discuss a
private matter of singular
importance...

HEMINGES
 ...with our friend of many years.

CONDELL
 We'll come earlier in the day...

ROSE
 It's members only, day and night.

She sees Lady Bassano...

ROSE (CONT'D)
 (to Lady Bassano)
 And women must use the ladies
 entrance... of which there is none,
 thank God!

Rose enters the pub and slams the door behind her.

LADY BASSANO
 And those who sneak in on the backs
 of their men must be bound and
 gagged.
 (beat)
 What brings you gentlemen to
 Cripplegate again?

HEMINGES
 (to Condell)
 She could invest...

CONDELL
 (to Heminges)
 Let us feel her out.

CALBANO
 Ma non su.

Lady Bassano clocks Calbano.

HEMINGES
 The idea is this

CONDELL
 His plays... very popular.

HEMINGES
 And he is revered.

CONDELL
 From Cripplegate to the King
 James's Court.

CALBANO
Venire al punto.

CONDELL
So, Heminges and I wish to gather
all of William's works into a
single folio... Leather bound!

HEMINGES
And sell subscriptions to those of
a literary bent.

LADY BASSANO
And you would like me to invest?

CALBANO
Lei e' una donna in gamba. Stai
attento!

Lady Bassano clocks Calbano again.

CONDELL
You can expect a great return.

LADY BASSANO
And in this folio, you will include
all the Italian plays?

HEMINGES
Italian, M'Lady?

LADY BASSANO
Romeo and Juliet, Merchant of
Venice, Julius Caesar...

CALBANO
La Tempesta! Tutto bene!

LADY BASSANO
I have invested already. Too much.
Far too much. With no return at
all.

CALBANO
Taming of the Shrew? Ebreo di
Malta!

CONDELL
Not sure we get your meaning,
M'Lady.

LADY BASSANO

Ah, he never did confess did he?
Not even in his bitter sonnets
where I am cast in a certain role.

CONDELL

We did suspect it.

LADY BASSANO

But, William Shakespeare loves his
money so he'll say yes to this and
toil with you to double-stir the
cauldron where printer's ink is
bubbled into gold.

HEMINGES

(to Condell)

He knew her in those days....

CALBANO

Ma, solo biblicamente. Non la vera
donna...

LADY BASSANO

So, yes, I will invest, but on two
conditions. First, that I am given
credit for the Italian plays that
Shakespeare and I co-wrote.

CONDELL

What!?

LADY BASSANO

And second, that I am paid a
royalty on every copy sold.

HEMINGES

You jest.

CONDELL

Credit you...? A joke!

Cagely indignant, Lady Bassano marches off.

CALBANO

She has no sense of humour.
(calling out to Lady
Bassano, but under his
breath)

How do you like my English now?

As she exits, Calbano follows in a hurry and also exits.

HEMINGES

He has never been to Italy.

CONDELL

Is Montagu an Italian name?

HEMINGES

She has a case, perhaps.

CONDELL

She's thrown a fillet of a fenny snake into our pot.

HEMINGES

We must go to print before she sends her barking lawyer.

Both exit.

SCENE 7 - OUTSIDE THE GLOBE THEATRE - MIDDAY

Veteran Harold shuffles on stage and stands below him as Richard looks over and around him anxiously awaiting the arrival of his brother and Fletcher.

VETERAN HAROLD

Oy.
(beat)
Oy!

RICHARD BURBAGE

I have no money for you today.

VETERAN HAROLD

I did not have my hand out, Sir. I do not always play the beggar.

RICHARD BURBAGE

What do you want?

VETERAN HAROLD

The gift of a word or two from our greatest actor. A phrase. A short speech perhaps from your repertoire. Pardon my French.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Not today.

He reaches into his purse for a shilling.

RICHARD

Take this and bugger off.

He flings the coin at the beggar's feet.

VETERAN HAROLD

Something for the lesser knowns.
Tittus Andronicas...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Titus.

VETERAN HAROLD

Cariolanus then. Or Cymbeline. How
'bout Troillus and what's er name?

Other street people gather round and egg Richard on.

VETERAN HAROLD (CONT'D)

You can quell the rumours with a
snip, a snatch...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Rumours?

VETERAN HAROLD

That Mr. Shakespeare's well's run
dry. That this here place will
forevermore just repeat his echo
forevermore, forevermore.

Richard decides to curry favour with the crowd and draws
himself up and inflates his chest.

RICHARD BURBAGE

*You common cry of curs! whose
breath I hate
As reek o' the rotten fens, whose
loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied
men
That do corrupt my air, I banish
you;
And here remain with your
uncertainty!*

Everyone applauds RICHARD BURBAGE.

VETERAN HAROLD

But them's is Shakespeare's words
which you empower. Rumour has it
that Fletcher's words...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!

The crowd applauds again.

VETERAN HAROLD

You nuance the words that a writer merely pens. Maybe we'll pay our shilling come the day...

People nod and disperse in good humour. All exit except Veteran Harold who stands leaning against a nearby wall with a beggar's cup extended.

Cuthbert carrying a paste pot and Fletcher carrying a roll of posters enter and walk toward RICHARD as the crowd breaks around them.

RICHARD BURBAGE

You're late. The others have been here sometime, ready to rehearse.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

But, not Will.

RICHARD BURBAGE

He's always late.

FLETCHER

He won't be coming.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Fuck!

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

He's mucking barefoot under London Bridge.

FLETCHER

Playing ducks and drakes with shards of busted poetry.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

...While preaching at a gyre of gulls that shit upon his manic head.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Did you not call out?

FLETCHER

Bootless cries.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

He affected not to hear us, though
I'm sure he did.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Fuck him. We'll get another man to
play his part.

(beat)

Fletcher, take this and consider,
if you will, my little edits. Just
here and there. Punched up a bit.

Richard hands a dismayed Fletcher the script then opens the
door of the theatre to let him enter.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Shakespeare's spread the word that
the play's not his...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Bastard!

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Ah, but just as he calls at gulls
when he walks the river's bank,
across the city, wherever he
wanders, he tweets and twitters
Fletcher's name.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Trumples him?

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Praises him. Lauds his work. Says
it in such a way as to make all
believe that what he wrote in all
his years is but matchstick craft
compared to Fletcher's bonfire art.

RICHARD BURBAGE

So, on first night we'll have a
crowd of gullibles. Well, who
cares what carries them here as
long as our costs are covered.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Just play big amidst Fletcher's
trumpet blasts and canon fire.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Hah! You place too great a burden
on a single actor's skill. No
brother, I will not play the Fool.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

There's one other thing we must
acquire before the doors are open.

(beat)

Insurance.

He motions toward Veteran Harold.

CUT

And I think I know how and where to
purchase it.

They exit into the theatre.

ACT 2**SCENE 1 - FOXE AND SPEED - SAME**

Rose tends bar, carries drinks to customers, keeps things tidy, goes about her business.

Enter Calbano on tip toe looking for something. He moves quickly around the room while Rose looks on with astonishment.

He lifts the hats of the bar patrons to check their faces, puts his ear to the floor boards, then pops to his feet, and cocks his ear to listen for upstairs noises.

ROSE
Oy! Oy! What do you think you're doing?

Calbano puts finger to mouth and shushes her so he can listen.

ROSE (CONT'D)
Shush me in my own house!? Out with you!

She comes around and starts pushing Calbano toward the door. He digs his heels in but by pushing hard, grunting and panting, she is able to slide him along.

CALBANO
(thick Italian accent)
Pray you, tread softly, that the blind mole may not hear a foot fall...

Just as they near the door, enter Shakespeare, looking worse for wear. Campion follows.

CALBANO (CONT'D)
Signor Shakespeare!

Shakespeare holds the door open so Rose can eject Calbano. Calbano puts his feet on the door jams to stop her.

CALBANO (CONT'D)
Beware the ides of March!

Shakespeare laughs.

CALBANO (CONT'D)
I rather goeth before I fall.

Shakespeare laughs again.

SHAKESPEARE

Proud boy.

Shakespeare nods at Rose to let him down. Rose retreats to the bar.

CALBANO

I come to find you. Because, I have... How I say? Un avvertimento. A warning, yes? Also, to ask a favour. Not favour. I ask you help.

SHAKESPEARE

Warn me about..?

CALBANO

You walk the streets.

SHAKESPEARE

The maze. I do.

CALBANO

At night. Sometimes in the day. I follow you.

SHAKESPEARE

I know.

CALBANO

My feet are sore, you walk so much.

SHAKESPEARE

I am soul-scarred myself.

CALBANO

I do not go down to il fiume but I stand on bridge and watch.

SHAKESPEARE

I know.

CALBANO

I like the birds, but not bird shit, to tell the truth.

SHAKESPEARE

And when you returned to your mistress what did you say?

CALBANO

That you are mad. Pazzo. But, this I also tell her.

(MORE)

CALBANO (CONT'D)

You nice man. You never smack a kid or kick a dog.

SHAKESPEARE

Rose! A jar of ale for this young parrot.

They walk to the bar as Rose pours two tankards of ale. Shakespeare drinks first and puts them on the counter. Calbano sips carefully, takes a swallow - then spits it out in disgust.

Other patrons enter and come to the bar. Shakespeare moves Calbano away as Rose serves the others drink.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Your mistress is in the grip of her adamantia, but, what's your warning?

CALBANO

She wishes to squeeze your balls. Like this...

Calbano grabs his own balls and squeezes so hard he falls on the floor moaning and cries in pain. Shakespeare laughs and the other patrons wince.

SHAKESPEARE

Another man with self-inflicted wounds.

Calbano releases himself and rises. He takes a giant quaff from his tankard. As he talks Shakespeare also drinks his tankard to the bottom.

CALBANO

I ask her the same. She say this:
 (acting like Lady Bassano)
 I give him love. I give him passion. Ambition. Hate. Revenge. Justice. War. Peace. Wine, water, and blood I make flow for him. Magic I give to him. I give him kingdoms, mountains, seas, and islands on which his writing prospers. I give him drama, comedy and don't forget say she, tragedies of men both blind and sighted.

SHAKESPEARE

Bravo!

CALBANO

She say he in debt to me. He no
pay me back. Now, he pay. Now he
pay!

SHAKESPEARE

Good work, my boy!

CALBANO

You like?

SHAKESPEARE

You wish my help. With what?

CALBANO

This is the favour I wish to ask.

(beat)

I wish to be the actor. No longer
be the dog. You write play. I say
your words.

Enter the Burbage brothers, Heminges, Condell and Fletcher.
Rose quickly comes around the bar and stands in front of
Richard ready to eject them. The other patrons leave.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Hello Rose, my love.

HEMINGES

Hello Will...

CONDELL

Will...

Fletcher tugs his forelock in Shakespeare's direction.

SHAKESPEARE

(quietly to Calbano)

There is my expostle, John.
Beware! He preaches an old
testament.

ROSE

Not here. Not now.

Richard pulls out a purse and dangles it before Rose's nose.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Drinks, Rose. For all.

Rose looks to Shakespeare to see if he wants them to remain.
He does not object.

RICHARD

William! An expected pleasure.
And who is this?

SHAKESPEARE

This boy. He is an actor, Richard.
Natural born.
(to Calbano)
Tell him your name?

CALBANO

(proudly)
Calbano. Calbano Diprospero da
Isola Giglio. This is una island.

Rose brings a tray of tankards which everyone takes except Calbano. They drink.

CONDELL

A gigolo from Giglio.

HEMINGES

Of pirates he is the figlio.

CONDELL

A pretty boy.

SHAKESPEARE

It's true, Calbano, you will make a
pretty woman.

Offended, Calbano reflexively puts his hand on his stiletto.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Take no offence, Calbano. Even our
most famous actor did turns in
smocks and slippers. All of us did
when first we trod the boards. You
want to act? You first must don a
dress and rouge your cheeks, and
follow the script that God gave
women.

CONDELL

At all costs, protect your pussy.

HEMINGES

And name your price before you give
it up.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Ah, the cost, the cost.

He takes Calbano aside.

SHAKESPEARE

(to Calbano,
confidentiality)

Calbano, these men can put you on
the stage. Get you to your
mistress home and tell her that I
have submitted to your threats.

(beat)

Give me your dagger.

Calbano hesitates but hands it to Shakespeare who then jabs
his writing hand. Shakespeare returns the stiletto to
Calbano's hand.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Tell her you drew blood on the hand
with which I used to write. Tell
her, I have submitted to her
threats, that I will meet her here,
tonight, that she must come alone.
Tell her I will - I *will* - give
credit where credit's due. Say it
just like that.

CALBANO

I say the words.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Willy. We must speak!

SHAKESPEARE

And when she has left her house
Calbano...

CALBANO

Yes.

SHAKESPEARE

Go to her closet.

CALBANO

Si.

SHAKESPEARE

Take a dress.

RICHARD BURBAGE

William! Damn your soul!

CALBANO

No!

SHAKESPEARE

Put it on, and then return.

CALBANO

No.

SHAKESPEARE

You must steal your freedom,
Calbano. Be brave and bold. Be
that, and your entrance here before
these men tonight shall be your
debut tomorrow at King Henry's
Court below the straw and rafters
of The Globe.

Calbano, now excited, makes for the door. Fletcher trips
him. Calbano pulls his stiletto to retaliate.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

(throws a kiss at Calbano)

Go!

(beat)

A jar! My Queendom for a jar!

(beat)

Richard, friends, what brings you
here?

HEMINGES

We are your friends, Will.

CONDELL

Come to dig you out of this
sepulchral place.

SHAKESPEARE

You would bring me to the light?

RICHARD BURBAGE

We do.

SHAKESPEARE

Rose! Another! Mr. Burbage buys.

RICHARD BURBAGE

You will not pour another, Rose.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

This man will leave this place with
us.

RICHARD BURBAGE

(to Heminges and Condell)

Take him to Montjoy's house.

SHAKESPEARE

I will drink my fill before I leave
this place.

(MORE)

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Here is my truest home. And Rose,
are you not my truest wife?

ROSE

I am. I am.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Tomorrow's first night for our new
play, Will.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

You must come and take a bow.

HEMINGES

For the lines you wrote, Will. You
and Fletcher here, co-writers.

SHAKESPEARE

Shall we be frank, my friends.
You've put my name on your poster,
for mercenary purposes. But, it is
not my play. I gave it a rib, just
a rib. The remainder of its body is
the work of your new genius, for it
is he who now chews the apple from
your tree. I'll have my drink,
Rose!

She brings his tankard. Shakespeare takes a long quaff.

RICHARD BURBAGE

You will not waste your life like
this.

SHAKESPEARE

This is the work house to which I
have been consigned by life. Here,
I toil in earnest with The Right
Royal Society of the Very Dead
Parrots whose members delve the
very depths of a secret
knowledge... Well, all things
bright and beautiful. Don't we,
Rose? Don't we?

ROSE

Aye. In the way of true drunks
everywhere.

RICHARD BURBAGE

We will not stand by. No, Sir, we
will not.

SHAKESPEARE

I cannot play to the non-inebriates
of this world. You understand.

RICHARD BURBAGE

What I understand, Shakespeare,
Sir, is that from here, out of your
brain meat, and here, your thumping
heart, and from here, your poisoned
guts, came not just stories, but a
cast of characters to tell them
true, all in mortal predicaments in
which every human beast sees their
very self. For, who is not Lord or
Lady of their house? Who does not
connive? Who's not The Fool?
Wants not love? Has not hated? For
children fretted? Felt lust and
exaltation in their groins? Been
bitter over misplaced trust?
Pitied the mad and dispossessed?
Themselves been mad with grievous
loss? Has watched lightening crack
their world? marvelled to hear
your thunder speak. Been humbled
by the power of your words.

Shakespeare claps weakly at Burbage's performance to belittle
it, then picks up his tankard and turns away. By the time
he reaches the bar, he's angry.

SHAKESPEARE

If only the redemptive power of
words could save me now.

Condell and Heminges go to either side of Shakespeare, ready
to carry him away.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Come with us, Will.

Shakespeare ignores him.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Goddamnit, Will!

Angrily, Shakespeare turns to Richard with his tankard in
hand and sloshes some on Richard.

SHAKESPEARE

Go play your King. I'll not have
you play the Saviour here.

Suddenly, Richard grabs Shakespeare's tankard and dashes it against a wall. Everyone starts, but Rose is angered. Shakespeare is pleased with the result.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

You've made quite a splash, as always.

(yelling)

I'll have another - on the house!

He takes a stool at the bar.

ROSE

Get out! Get out!

They all leave except Fletcher who retrieves the tankard.

ROSE (CONT'D)

You too.

FLETCHER

Yes, yes. But, let me comfort my friend. A little, yes?

(beat)

(beat)

William. Will. Clearly, you are loved by your old, old friends.

(beat)

I am the interloper. I have pushed too hard to take your place.

SHAKESPEARE

You think I was not a pusher in my day.

FLETCHER

But, you are Shakespeare and I am not.

ROSE

By god, there's the truth!

FLETCHER

Let us revert to the status quo. I hereby relinquish the shares you allowed me - kindly allowed me - to purchase from you. I had no right to drive that deal.

Shakespeare, more than a little soused, turns to Fletcher.

SHAKESPEARE

We made our bargain. You own the shares, I own your debt. I am not aggrieved. Not even a little.

FLETCHER

No, Shakespeare. Let us make ashes of our agreement. Make it smoke.

Shakespeare walks toward the door and opens it to let Fletcher out.

SHAKESPEARE

(slurring)

May your cannons better go off with a mighty bang. A fizzle will cost you dearly. Grab my mantle, such as it is. Costume yourself in my alleged playwright's cloak.

(beat)

As for me, I am done with pentameters iambic, spondees, couplets that must and always rhyme, sonnet psalms, and all the rest of the claps that trap. Done with the blank of verse. Go break a leg or two.

A very worried Fletcher exits.

ROSE

He's going to lose his shirt, that boy.

Shakespeare shrugs and returns to the bar.

ROSE (CONT'D)

You really ought to go find your bed, William. You'll still want to see the play tomorrow. Knowing you. Take a seat up in the gods. But, first, rest up. I'll be here later to take your money.

Hank, a rough looking ironmonger enters.

HANK

Bill. Rose.

ROSE

Same as always? Of course.

He sits at a table and she brings a jar of ale to him.

Jack, a down at heels teamster enters.

JACK
(squawks like a parrot)
Squaaaaaaaaaawk....

He gives Shakespeare a rib tickle, then walks to Hank's table and sits. Rose delivers a drink to him along with a drafts board and pieces. The two men set-up a game and play.

Curly, a Thames boatman, enters and walks to the bar, slapping Shakespeare on the shoulder and takes a stool beside him. Rose serves a tankard of ale to him.

CURLY
(to Rose)
Erm....the er, um...

Shakespeare shushes him.

Rose puts a set of darts down on the counter, that Curly picks up along with his tankard, then takes to another part of the room to throw darts.

Dick, a flamboyant con man in dilapidated clothes, enters.

DICK
All hale, you multi-motivated,
cross-conflicted, love-deprived,
shamesick sons of bitches. Big
Dick has here arrived, standing
firm in this rooting place! Fear
not. For this place is my home
away from home - and not a single
Parrot dead or otherwise will have
his pockets picked or his willy
pulled, save and except for William
Shakespeare, Esquire, proud bearer
of a coat of arms, Non Sans Droict,
and all that palaver.

Shakespeare stands and embraces Dick.

SHAKESPEARE
Behold the bombeast!

DICK

Now, William, time to pay your particular and on-going debts, for last time we were here together, in exchange for stories from our sordid, shit-filled streets that one day you might use in furtherance of your pain-inflicting trade, you promised to stand me a drink or two or three.

Shakespeare gestures to Rose to pour them both a drink as Dick takes a stool beside Shakespeare who puts his head down again and mutters to himself, deep in thought.

DICK (CONT'D)

(to Shakespeare)

You wear a heavy brow, my brother. What doesn't ail you?

Suddenly, Shakespeare spins round on his stool, manages to get to his feet and walks away from the bar.

SHAKESPEARE

We will make a play.

DICK

Gentlemen, stand to. Mr. Shakespeare has fired his imagination. Who'll play the King, or Prince or Duke? I nominate myself for I have the jelly royal.

The other men stir and watch Shakespeare wobble on his feet, then join him and Dick. Rose looks on with concern.

SHAKESPEARE

Not a single noble person will grace our stage. No man who lives his life at Court. No judge of the House of Lords or Chancery or any other place of judgement. No army man of rank, no laced-up, red-robed prelate, though, with your agreement we will allow a ragged priest or two to trail his dirty alb this way and soak up our swill. No man...

JACK

...or woman...

SHAKESPEARE

Aye. Or woman who lords it over us.
Not any person whose nose we must
look up to see their eyes look down
on us.

HANK

You shake things up...

SHAKESPEARE

We will be our lowly selves in the
glamorous dimensions of this our
piss tank. Yay, though the seconds
feather into minutes, hours, days
and weeks, then months and years,
and yay though they take wing to
fly the utter dark of our
destruction, we shall make a non-
existent show of which no record
shall survive.

DICK

Right'o. Right'o. I'm in. Where
is your script?

JACK

Not that we can read...

Shakespeare jabs a finger into Dick's forehead.

SHAKESPEARE

Our script is here.

Then into Henry's chest.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

And here.

Then pats Curly's stomach.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Your appetites good friends.

Then makes an attempt to grab Henry's balls.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

And here.

DICK

Careful, Will. He is a sticky-
handed wankful man.

SHAKESPEARE

Stand close. I will show you how
it's done.

(beat)

What is our story?

(beat)

Born, live, die.

(beat)

What is our major plot and all our
sub-plots too?

(beat)

C'mon ye actors!

(beat)

The myriad ways and means of our
undoing!

CURLY

Murder of the Self! Passionate and
bloody, and done in spite.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes! And then, ye Parrots, we
shall take revenge upon our Selves!
For guilt shall move us to
annihilation's precipice.

(beat)

(beat)

Motive?

JACK

A beating heart. Thump-thump.

SHAKESPEARE

I love you Jack, but no. It is our
lifelong search for justice.

HANK

After being tossed from paradise.
I see where your mind is going.

SHAKESPEARE

Hank, you wise old water-walking
boot! But you come too late.

(whispering)

For all that cold eviction follows
inevitably upon our crying birth.

DICK

Comedy or tragedy?

Enter Calbano wearing a fancy hat and dressed in one of Lady
Bassano's dresses. He's made up with a bit of rouge and
lipstick. Rose and the men watch him enter.

ROSE
Farce it is and always will be.

DICK
Amen!

SHAKESPEARE
My boy!

Calbano is nervous and ashamed. Shakespeare goes to him and draws him to the circle where he and the others have gathered.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)
Behold our mother, daughter,
sister.

Shakespeare goes down on his knee and takes Calbano's hand.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)
(to the others)
Down on your knees!

The other men, hesitate, but do so. Shakespeare kisses Calbano's hand, but Calbano reflexively draws it back.

CURLY
You're in a play.

JACK
Play your part or leave the stage.

CALBANO
Oh. Oh! OK. Va bene!

He curtsies. All the men rise except Shakespeare.

CALBANO (CONT'D)
My words?

SHAKESPEARE
Rose, a drink for all while I
instruct Calbano in the manly art
of being a woman.

The men shuffle to the bar where Rose serves them drinks.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)
Walk on your toes. Like this.

Shakespeare demonstrates then Calbano follows.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

You are a master. Thin your voice
and twitter like a bird: he-he-he.

CALBANO

He-he-he. He-he-he. He-he-he.

The men applaud. Rose rolls her eyebrows.

SHAKESPEARE

Now, act like you smell sweet, and
not like your private parts are
redolent of mackerel.

ROSE

Hey hey!!!

SHAKESPEARE

Come hither look. Yes, yes. Big
eyes.

CALBANO

Words. I wish to act with words.
To be an actor!

JACK

Start with lies!

CURLY

All your indispensable
requirements.

HANK

Promises of eternal love.

Shakespeare gestures to Rose to bring he and Calbano a jar of
ale. She does.

ROSE

Here have the same bitter that
these men have swallowed.

CALBANO

You said you would speak to Mr.
Burbage. The new play. Tomorrow,
yes? I will be on a real stage
there, yes?

Shakespeare drinks then puts his tankard down and averts his
eyes.

CALBANO (CONT'D)

You didn't speak to him.

Shakespeare puts his right hand on Calbano's cheek.

DICK

He is a pretty thing.

SHAKESPEARE

This human face. This brain-filled skull.

Calbano slaps Shakespeare's hand away. But, Shakespeare puts it up on Calbano's cheek again.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Hold still.

Calbano grabs Shakespeare's hand, but does not pull it away.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

This hand can do no harm. It has
no skill,
Except to cause mankind a headlong
fall from grace
Because it rips the net of time and
space
And loosens the grip of our
invented gods.

JACK

Our Will's a heretic.

SHAKESPEARE

Down we fall. Down we fall. What
are the odds
That any make a sempiternal splash,
Survive both our flailing life and
the crash?

CURLY

You probe our splattered entrails
with your quill.

SHAKESPEARE

I have, but, I have long since had
my fill.

HANK

It's just the drink, poor boy.
They be his words. Strange truths
that only seem improbable.

CURLY

He sees something of himself in
you.

JACK

Aye. His long lost youth.

Once again, Shakespeare takes Calbano's face again, but with both hands this time.

SHAKESPEARE

Be more than a character in a play,
Be more than a mere writer's
bloodied prey.
Live the fullest dimensions of a
man.
And fly, my boy, don't fall, across
your span.

Calbano shakes loose again then pushes Shakespeare who falls backwards and curls into a fetal position.

CALBANO

(angry and hurt)

I will be there tomorrow and I will
bring down the house with my
woman's ways.

SHAKESPEARE

That's my boy. Act innocence
itself!

Calbano exits and slams the door behind him. Rose strides to where Shakespeare lays.

ROSE

Get him up.

They do.

ROSE (CONT'D)

We've had enough. Get ye to your
bed.

Jack takes him under an arm and walks a rubbery Shakespeare out the door.

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT 3

SCENE 1 - MONTJOY'S LODGING HOUSE - SHAKESPEARE'S ROOMS - NIGHT

Calbano asleep on a small bed. Shakespeare sits with head hung and sleeping at a table on which there is an empty wine bottle, a sheaf of blank papers, a quill pen and an ink well.

Campion is asleep against a wall.

Shakespeare stirs and comes groggily awake, then Campion does. Campion reaches for his instrument and, as if moved by some interior force, plays it.

Shakespeare lifts his very hung-over head to take his bearings, then slowly swivels and faces the audience.

SHAKESPEARE

The King. He sits upon a chair a
host
Of grieved barons took from St.
Edward's ghost...

Shakespeare gets shakily to his feet and works out the vision of his dream.

...then rivetted to the twisting
river's bank
(beat)
To force his royal hand to hack his
rank.
(beat)
(beat)
No. No. Not another King!
(beat)
Malhabit of the tired mind.

He feels the wound of his right hand.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Bloody, wounded hand!

Suddenly, he's angry. He paces the room and finally comes to the table where he bends over the blank paper.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Not do. Not do. I must not,
cannot do
What I have done before.
I blew *that* candle out!
(MORE)

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

In black, unfathomed cold I must
find
New reasons - and rhymes - to
enfold.

He walks to the side of the bed and looks down on Calbano.

And listen here for the incantated
breath
That sings of life and shouts at
coming death,
Put my ear to our rising-falling
ribs
And hear the human pump's thumping
drabs and dribs.

He walks toward front and center.

But, how can I trust my repetitious
heart
To not repeat? To impregnate art
With the sudden, glittering spurts
of light
That now illuminate my deepening
night,
I must throw-off the sexy grip of
fame,

He strikes a match.

And find another me in the match's
flame.

He lights the candle on the table.

Break down the code. Unlock all we
utter
To let our hidden meanings fly
their coup.
Enact the human body's semaphore
To flag that which the body really
speaks.
Penetrate the deepest human
silence,
And what amazes in the open human
eye,
The sometimes glint that shockingly
appalls.
That's what I must do. Must do, in
truth.

(beat)

These drink-soaked bones must seize
my sober youth.

While morning light penetrates the window curtains of Shakespeare's rooms, on another part of the stage enter Richard and Cuthbert talking quietly and conspiratorially.

RICHARD BURBAGE

It is almost certain we will not draw a crowd tonight. Fletcher's name is too little known.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

We need more work of genius.

CUTHBERT BURBAGE (CONT'D)

Let's get him back to Stratford Upon the Avon where his wife...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Anne...

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Aye, Anne. Let us pray she hath a way.

They exit.

A loud banging on a door. Shakespeare freezes. More banging, even louder. Calbano starts. Shakespeare freezes, but then gestures to Calbano to hide. As the door is banged again, Calbano quickly gets under the bed.

More banging.

SHAKESPEARE

Enter.

Lady Bassano sweeps in. She fixes a look on Shakespeare then moves to a window to throw back the curtains. Bright light floods the room and causes Shakespeare to wince. They circle one another.

LADY BASSANO

Condell and Heminges would collect your plays and stitch a folio which they would sell.

SHAKESPEARE

I laughed.

LADY BASSANO

Why laugh?

SHAKESPEARE

The playing is the thing. Who'll read a play?

LADY BASSANO

They asked me to invest..

SHAKESPEARE

They told me your conditions. And then, I laughed again.

(beat)

And laughed again.

He pours himself a cup of wine. He gestures to her to ask if she'd like some. She shakes her head.

LADY BASSANO

Rose Thorne said Calbano might be here.

SHAKESPEARE

Here? Why?

LADY BASSANO

He sought you out, did he not?

SHAKESPEARE

Did he? Don't remember.

(beat)

But, I do recall when we were last together here.

She comes close to him. He stops. She puts her hand on his cheek. He feigns to bite it. She titters and pulls it away.

Shakespeare now moves very close to her. She stands her ground. Clumsily and over-eager he draws her close and tries to kiss her as he paws her.

LADY BASSANO

What? You would grope me? Knead my breasts? Use your dubious writing hand to pull me close - not quite against my will - the sinister other, to lock my back while you thrust your old bones into my cradling hips? My body is unmoved. My lips are dry, Will. But I am, still, your merciless muse.

SHAKESPEARE

Your body? Your body is a tired inspiration. But, yes, I was inspired, in that now gone tick of tickless time. A vague memory of your younger, naked, lubricious self, candlelit and calm.

(MORE)

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

You had decided I would be your lover, and so I was, until I wasn't. It was I who trembled in your cradle. Never you. Naive man. Expert woman. This? Now? A misread moment. Thought you wanted me. Thought I should oblige. Couldn't anyway. Thing stopped working. Gave me one more regret. You told me tales didn't you, when the time was right? Two tragic child lovers in Verona, and a couple of gentlemen there. That subtle merchant Jew in Venice, and let's not forget the Blackamoor who proved, in the maze of those canals, so easy to confuse. The bloody demise of Roman emperors, a shrew tamed, some things that end well, others in which far too much is made of nothing. And all the other stories you imported here from Italy, but could not re-tell yourself, not with your little, broken English. Could not even if you had more grasp on it, because our English language had not invented ways and means. Not yet. The post coital fuck of my happy, word-coining brain, the way you stroked my brow, a bit of bread and cheese, a warming drink, that feeling I mistook as love, made me spout...

LADY BASSANO

Poetry.

SHAKESPEARE

You knew it would. You sought me out. Made me your lover; yourself, my muse. That's over.

LADY BASSANO

But as it happens, you need new stories. Do you not?

SHAKESPEARE

I do not. I have this ringing nothingness upon which to scribble. My bewilderment.

LADY BASSANO

Don't be silly. I have just returned from Italy with many stories you can use. Look, there. Paper. Pen. Ink. Write them down.

SHAKESPEARE

Let's leave the paper blank.

LADY BASSANO

Primo. A man named Copernicus has made calculations that put the fear of God into the Holy Father. The world no longer spins around the sun.

SHAKESPEARE

Copernicus, Copernicus
The dirty little Pole
Crunched his numbers late one night
And made Holiness a whole.

(beat)

Still spouting you see.

LADY BASSANO

Secondo. Cristoforo Colombo...

SHAKESPEARE

I know. I know the story.

LADY BASSANO

A new world discovered, William!

SHAKESPEARE

It laid in wait.

LADY BASSANO

Il Contorno. In Florence, I met a man named Machiavelli...

SHAKESPEARE

You met a man named Machiavelli
Who probed your jar of Royal Jelly
And poked his finger in a truth:
You'd lost the quiver of your youth.

(beat)

Time's arrow flies the world above.
Its target, always, the end of love.

LADY BASSANO

Clever boy.

(beat)

E dolce. Some dessert. I met a
Leonardo, painter and inventor ne
plus ultra.

SHAKESPEARE

Inventor of what?

LADY BASSANO

The future. Yes. The future.

(beat)

As the armies of the past
approached, he fled Milan. Now
gardens at the Vatican for the
Medici Pope, dementedly provoking
the white and red roses to war once
more.

SHAKESPEARE

Agony and ecstasy
Together dance a jig.
An electric touch
May shock mankind
But I don't give a fig.

LADY BASSANO

You confuse both art and artists
but such stories too lay in wait
for *your* discovery, William. Take
up that pen again!

SHAKESPEARE

I only want to hear the animal
howls of human men and human woman.
Let's fuck, or not fuck. One or
the other. I don't care, Emilia.
But, what I want now from my muse
is silence. What I want from all
the words I know is quiet. What I
want, what I have always wanted to
communicate - if only to my
pathetic self - is absolutely
nothing about absolutely
everything, so that the fated human
heart can be heard above the human
din. Before I die.

LADY BASSANO

Not. Not fuck. It will mess my
hair.

She starts to exit then returns part way.

LADY BASSANO (CONT'D)

And did I tell you? No? Calbano is your son. Our bastard boy. I left here all those years ago when I could no longer hide my shame, my belly out to here. Our ship was Leghorn-bound, but just north of Rome we wrecked on Giglio where we almost drowned, but didn't. And there, he came crying into this... This.

SHAKESPEARE

You kick him like a tethered dog.

LADY BASSANO

He came from the wreckage. But, lucky you. As the destiny that he thinks is his recedes, he howls the elemental noise that you so love, the cry of every man I've ever hated, including you.

She goes to his desk and finds a couple of matches.

LADY BASSANO (CONT'D)

Need these. See you later. At the premier of Henry Eight perhaps, which I know you didn't write because these days you cannot get your quill to fly.

SHAKESPEARE

Does Calbano know?

LADY BASSANO

Even I would not kick him as hard as that.

She exits.

Calbano struggles out from under the bed. He's crying.

CALBANO

Do you think it's true?

SHAKESPEARE

I don't know. Let's say yes.

CALBANO

No.

Calbano wanders and collects himself. He speaks now in perfect English.

CALBANO (CONT'D)

She did not serve the final course,
il digestivo. Here's your story.

Shakespeare wants to comfort him. Calbano waves him off.

CALBANO (CONT'D)

By that woman, the child me was
pulled through massing throngs to a
piazza where a hundred thousand
people jammed the space. After an
hour's long harangue by the now-
restored Duke of Florence, who was
by then as pompous and self-assured
as he was in days we'd all
forgotten, a rat in friar's robes
came flying from a window high
above our heads and split upon the
ground and splashed our astonished
faces with his mortal blood and
guts.

SHAKESPEARE

And then...?

CALBANO

A crowded silence so profound it
raised me up to heaven where I
became old and wordless as you are
now.

SHAKESPEARE

I hear it.

CALBANO

But, when I looked down to where he
lay busted a sudden cheer
reverberated through the stones of
Florence...

SHAKESPEARE

Yes...

CALBANO

... because the wingless Savonarola
spoke no more and the fire he had
lit by words and words alone, the
fire into which these creatures
had flung the gilded memento's of
their guilt and shame, was then
extinguished and their secret
pleasures became sacrosanct again.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll write it!

CALBANO

Not even William Shakespeare in his prime could recompose the words that Savonarola used to make a city crazy.

Calbano exits.

SHAKESPEARE

My secret pleasure is that I no longer need to try.

Momentarily, still in bare feet, his shirt untucked, Shakespeare finds himself in front of Montjoy's House.

Upstage, The Dead Parrots, Big Dick, Jack, Hank and Curly, enter and flow toward the Foxe and Speed where Rose opens the door to let them in.

Overjoyed to see them, Shakespeare crosses the road and tries to enter but can't. He exerts himself against the door, but it does not yield. He bangs upon it but there is no answer.

Exhausted Shakespeare flops in a chair beside a table by the ale house door, head in hands.

The door opens and The Dead Parrots flow out and move downstage and off, now boisterous and a good deal drunk, but their antics are soundless.

As they exit, Shakespeare lifts his head and sees them walking out of view. He stands as if to call, but then holds back.

Rose comes out the ale house door carrying a tankard of ale on a tray which she holds up to Shakespeare. He looks dumbfounded at her.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Rose?

ROSE

Here, good William. A never-empty jar of ale for you. May God forgive me. But, it's who I am, in'it, and what I do.

SHAKESPEARE

I make my coin and give myself a little life by apportioning the great oceans of oblivion by the glass.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

I forgive you. Not your fault. I drown myself. You make a living by your trade - oceans of oblivion poured out by the glass.

ROSE

Drink up. I'll put it on your tab.

SHAKESPEARE

Rose...I am a father.

ROSE

Oh, yes you are

SHAKESPEARE

Twice. Hamlet and Caliban. Two testosterone youth made mad by maddened mothers.

ROSE

Hah! When he goes crying every flailing, frustrated man fingers his mother's dried-out dugs - an endless source of woe.

(beat)

(beat)

That play that's on tonight, yours or not, all the cripples, lepers and beggars hereabout, like moths, have been drawn to it.

(beat)

Drink up. Drink up.

Rose pushes the tankard to Shakespeare's mouth. He gulps and takes some down but a lot of it splashes down his chin. He staggers and catches his breath.

Exit Rose into the pub, cackling. She closes the door behind her.

A beggar, a leper and a cripple crutches enter from upstage and flow down the street and off, following the same path as The Dead Parrots.

The bells of St. Giles gong five times while Shakespeare looks heavenward and tries to steady himself.

Campion gestures in the direction taken by the street people.

SHAKESPEARE

(to Campion)

Let's go? You and I?

(beat)

Yes. Yes. Into Leonardo's invented future where Man stands spread-eagled inside the circle's rim like a martyr who awaits the arrows that will pierce his sainted heart. Past the lepers and the cripples and the broken heaps of men and women who never once, when they were children, dreamt of life and death as mean as this.

He quaffs.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Let's go. Past the mansions in which power makes its habitation and golden keys turn the tumblers of the money-box, and all inside is comfort manifest, but the rich weep at the thought of losing all they have. Into the squares where God's own churches cast doubts across a dozen burning crosses, and the ash of an ancient, polyhistor's truth settles on the black cat's hair as it leaps the nine-times-bolted gate of heaven for a shallow dish of Mary's milk.

He quaffs.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Let's go. Let's dance upon the notes you pluck through a grid of time and space, and make our way above the shit-piss current that flows around us, down to the river that will someday carry us out to a far-fetched sea. Come on. Let's go.

He offers a drink to Campion, who takes the tankard and drinks deeply.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Let's go, across this bridge of
clouds to sanity's other side, and
stumble there, drink-crazed but
wise, onto the dreamland of the
stage, where, once upon a time, I
made my mark, and there insert
ourselves into the noise of it's
framed-up life.

Shakespeare drinks the last of the ale and violently throws
the tankard away, witnessed by a startled Fletcher standing
in the backstage shadows.

To the sound of cornets, enter RICHARD Burbage as Henry VIII,
leaning on Condell's (as Cardinal Wolsey) shoulder, and other
players.

The on-stage players all look in the direction of the noise,
but go back quickly to the play.

RICHARD BURBAGE

(as King Henry VIII)

*My life itself, and the best heart
of it,
Thanks you for this great care: I
stood i' the level
Of a full-charged confederacy, and
give thanks
To you that choked it.*

FLETCHER

(loud whisper)

Shakespeare? Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE

Ah, Fletcher, mon semblable, mon
frère, he who is in debt to me.

FLETCHER

You only get your money if there's
a fortnight's run.

SHAKESPEARE

In my beginning is my end...

RICHARD BURBAGE

*Let be call'd before us
That gentleman of Buckingham's; in
person
I'll hear him his confession
justify;*

(MORE)

RICHARD BURBAGE (CONT'D)

*And point by point the treasons of
his master
He shall again relate.*

On stage, enter Heminges dressed as Queen Katherine.

SHAKESPEARE

(to Fletcher)

Your words he speaks. I hear a
surfeit of syllables. The broken
cadence of your consonants mars the
rhythm and the rhyme. You can
learn from me. I'll teach you
right.

FLETCHER

Fuck you, old man. Your paradigms
are bust.

HEMINGES

(as Queen Katherine)

...this makes bold mouths;

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, yes it does.

HEMINGES

*Tongues spit their duties out, and
cold hearts freeze
Allegiance in them; their curses
now
Live where their prayers did.*

Shakespeare grabs Fletcher by his collar.

SHAKESPEARE

You've botched it boy. You are
forever in my debt. But never
mind, if you don't cough up, ten
thousand other playwrights will
repay it.

He releases him, then skulks the stage until he stands to
stare at Richard.

RICHARD BURBAGE

*...he, My Lady,
Hath into monstrous habits put the
graces
That once were his, and is become
as black
As if besmear'd in hell.*

CONDELL

(as Wolsey)

*Please your highness, note
This dangerous conception in this
point,
Not friended by his wish, to your
high person
His will is most malignant...*

Richard exits.

Enter Calbano who stands as a lady in waiting beside Heminges dressed as Queen Katharine in the play. Shakespeare walks to Calbano and points at Condell.

SHAKESPEARE

*This priest has no God in which to
repose his faith. Trust ye not, my
son, in the magic of magicians.*

HEMINGES

*...take good heed
You charge not in your spleen a
noble person
And spoil your nobler soul.*

Condell and Heminges exit. Calbano undoes his dress, lets it drop to the floor and steps out of it. Now, wearing acrobatic top and bottom tights, he pulls his stiletto from the sheath hanging by his side.

He pulls the stiletto and holds it to Shakespeare's throat and makes Shakespeare go to his knees.

SHAKESPEARE

*Yes. Yes. I fucked your mother.
But I won't cry uncle!*

Calbano is appalled. He grabs Shakespeare's head like its a skull and raises him up.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

*A joke. I am a fellow of infinite
jest.*

Calibano runs off.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

(calling after)

Be ye a man! My boy. Be a man.

A waiter in character walks in with a tray of tankards.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

(as Sands in Henry VIII)

*Your grace is noble;
Let me have such a bowl may hold my
thanks
And save me from so much talking.*

The waiter casts a snide glance at Shakespeare, desperate for a drink, walks off without giving Shakespeare what he wants a drink.

Enter Lady Bassano as Anne Bolyn.

LADY BASSANO

(as Anne)

You are a merry gamester...

SHAKESPEARE

(as Sands)

*Yes, if I may make my play,
Here's to your ladyship...*

He rises unsteadily and tries to effect a deep bow, but stumbles again and then decides to drop to his knee before her while Fletcher skulks in the shadows moving with a lit match toward fuses that will set the cannons off when King Henry arrives at the party.

Shakespeare sees something moving above their heads. He points up.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)

Is that our boy? Why would he look
down on us?

LADY BASSANO

Burn in hell!

Shakespeare shifts to sit on his ass. Enter Heminges and Condell in costume still.

SHAKESPEARE

Hark, did I not hear a cliché
curse?

Oh, nothing, nothing could be
worse.

(beat)

Apologies M'Lady.
The drink I drink dilutes my verse.

Suddenly, in the shadows, Fletcher with a hateful look on his face, strikes a large match and touches the fuses that will light the squibs to sound the cannons. The fuse burns up into the out-of-sight rafters.

Heminges and Condell pull Shakespeare up and both put their arms around his back to hold him up. Shakespeare drapes his arms around their shoulder.

SHAKESPEARE (CONT'D)
I have been crucified.

Momentarily, a loud canon shot.

CONDELL
(as Wolsey)
What's that?

Another canon shot.

HEMINGES
(as the Chamberlain)
Look out there, some of ye!

A loud fizzle above as one of the squibs fails to explode.

CONDELL
(as Wolsey)
*What warlike voice,
And to what end is this?*

A strong flickering light in the rafters and on the walls. Shakespeare, still held up by Condell and Heminges, throws back his head to look up.

SHAKESPEARE
Then cartage I became, burning,
burning, burning...

Richard sweeps in as King Henry VIII wearing a mask, with Cuthbert following right on his heels in the costume of a gentleman.

RICHARD BURBAGE
Fire! Fire!

CUTHBERT BURBAGE
Clear the pit and galleries... No
life be lost!

Everyone scatters and exits the stage, leaving Shakespeare in the dark but with the glow and crackle of a fire around him. He crawls on his hands and knees downstage where a he turns a prop table to form a gravestone - engraved with "Milton" - against which he sits.

Momentarily, upstage, Fletcher appears under the bell tower of St. Giles.

FLETCHER

The play will not have its run,
Shakespeare. I am no more in your
debt than I ever was before.

As he exits, Lady Bassano with Calbano in agony pulling her piled-up cart behind enter flames coming from his back. St. Gile's bell gongs one deep note.

LADY BASSANO

The Globe has been consumed in
flame. Your world is but a cinder.

Shakespeare waves them off with the back of his hand.

SHAKESPEARE

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Lady Bassano and Calbano exit. Shakespeare falls asleep.

SCENE 2 - ST. GILE'S GRAVEYARD

Shakespeare, unconscious, shirt torn, vomit and dirt crusted on his clothes, is propped up by the "Milton" gravestone. Other gravestones and tombs lay about: Foxe, Speed, Frobisher, Bunyan, Andrewes etc.

Upstage, enter Condell and Hastings in silhouette. They see Shakespeare. Enter Richard and Cuthbert behind them. Heminges sees Shakespeare and points him out. The four men walk in a wide row to where Shakespeare lays.

Heminges kneels down and feels Shakespeare's neck with two fingers.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Dead?

HEMINGES

Never.

CONDELL

What do now?

CUTHBERT BURBAGE

Let sleeping dogs lie?

RICHARD BURBAGE

We'll take him home.

CONDELL

Home?

RICHARD BURBAGE

To Stratford. Deliver him back to
his second best bed into the arms
of his first best wife and hope for
him and them the blessings of every
god he ever mocked as he revealed
the devil in the driven and holy
human beast.

(beat)

Fetch the wagons, boys.

They hesitate but Richard indicates he will stay alone with Shakespeare. They all exit upstage.

Richard goes down on his knee then sidles up beside Shakespeare. He pulls Shakespeare to him so Shakespeare's head rests upon his shoulder. He strokes his hair.

RICHARD

Are we not old? I think we are.
Dwindled beings whose voices crack,
Whose bones now shout such agonies
that
Our muttered wisdom goes unheard.
We cannot be what we once were,
Can't do what our naive selves once
did,
Those days when, for the sake of
art, we barked,
That all the hurts we inflicted,
Even on those we said we loved,
Were done in righteous servitude
To our ambitions.

Shakespeare moans. RICHARD separates himself and gets up then sits on the top of the headstone.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Someone who
Knew that you and I are friends,
Asked me to assay your genius.
He thought your every work a bolt
That you flung-out of a secret,
Far-off storm. I laughed at that
Because you are not a bursting
Kind of man, not roiled in the
least.

(MORE)

RICHARD (CONT'D)

You master an ancient foundry
In whose dissolving fires you've
forged
The molten shapes of the human
mind,
And with every hammer strike
Sparked with profoundest life.

Shakespeare stirs and wakes.

SHAKESPEARE

(weakly)

Cursed be he who moves my bones...

The sound of wagons.

RICHARD

That you are tired from your
labours,
As we, your brothers, are tired
too,
Is nature's scheme. But you know
that.

(beat)

Let's get you to your feet, and
home.
And there breathe you its buoyant
air
And surface from the drink that
drowns.

He tries to pick Shakespeare up by getting him under the
arms. He pulls him up and manages to sit him on the
headstone.

Heminges, Condell and Cuthbert appear upstage as Shakespeare
comes awake.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Come friend, let's get you home.

FADE TO BLACK.

CURTAIN CALL:

Rose enters and goes front and center.

ROSE

Sometime shortly after The Globe burned down Shakespeare returned to Stratford-Upon-Avon to the wife and family he had all but abandoned there. If he wrote anything other than his will - a play, or even a poem - there is no record of it.

Shakespeare did live in the Cripplegate area of London, and lodged at the Montjoy's house even though he owned a house in Blackfriars. St. Giles, patron saint of cripples, lepers and beggars gave his name to the parish church, which still stands.

Shakespeare would have been well-known to Londoners who packed The Globe time and time again to see his plays performed.

VETERAN HAROLD and other street people, enter and take a bow and stay.

VETERAN HAROLD

Was he a drunk? Did drinking kill Shakespeare's creativity? We don't know. We just made a story to fill the empty spaces and times of which history is made.

Shakespeare's drinking mates at the Foxe and Speed are figures in our dream.

The Dead Parrots, Dick, Curly, Hank and Jack come out in costume and take a bow then exit again.

DICK

History tells us there was a Lady Emilia Bassano, possibly the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets 127 to 154. She may have inspired Shakespeare with those wonderful stories from Italy that form the basis of so many of his most important plays.

Enter Lady Bassano who takes a gracious bow.

LADY BASSANO

Were they lovers? Did they have a son? Just in our imaginations and only for present purposes.

Enter Calbano who takes a bow.

CALBANO

Shakespeare, of course, was a decades-long member of the most famous acting troupe of its day, first under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain, and later under the patronage of King James before whom they performed nearly two hundred times.

Enter The King's Men, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, John Heminges and Henry Condell. They bow.

HEMINGES

John Fletcher collaborated with Shakespeare on the three plays that scholars Shakespeare had a hand in before he stopped writing.

Enter Fletcher who takes a bow.

FLETCHER

Years after Shakespeare's death, Heminges and Condell did put a folio of Shakespeare's plays together, and but for that, perhaps he too would be unknown.

Rose steps forward.

ROSE

And I'm Rose Thorne the publican. I liked our Will, but, but to my shame, I liked his money more. How I ever got to be in one of his dark dreams, I'll never know.

She bows.

ROSE (CONT'D)

And then...there's William Shakespeare himself, as much an artefiction as he was a fact.

Enter Shakespeare. He bows.

All other players come front and center on either side of Shakespeare and they all bow together.