

Fortune's Fools

A play in two acts

by John Scavone

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Characters (in order of appearance)

Jasper O'Rourke, late 40's to early 50's, Ireland born,
still has a brogue, except when reciting Shakespeare

Samuel Jenkins, early 30's, African American and a former
slave, Jasper's partner

Chloe, early to mid 20's, African American and a former
slave, works for Francine

Pete Smith, mid to late 20's, African American and son of a
former slave, owner of a livery stable

Francine Griffin, early 40's, white, owner of a saloon and
bordello

Ned Bleakley, mid to late 40's, white, a Chicago alderman

Agnes Bleakley, mid to late 40's, white, Ned's wife and a
temperance advocate

Brother Mickey O'Toole, late 30's to early 40's, white, a
self-styled man of the cloth

Setting: The action takes place in the Royale Theater, with scenes played in various other locations on Chicago's near south side. The Royale is whatever theater we are in. As envisioned here, it is a fully equipped, old fashioned proscenium playhouse, suited to its name. However, it should be possible to make adjustments for a smaller space. For instance, the cyc and background buildings could be present on stage and lit on cue, rather than be flown or moved in. Or whereas the saloon is most conveniently and theatrically mounted on a wagon—having a front door, bar with stools and back bar, and two or three café tables with bentwood chairs—it could be simplified to a small bar and one table with chairs, and these could be brought on by hand. If such is the case, it is to be done by the actors at the direction of either Jasper or Samuel, emulating those movements which are specifically noted in the stage directions here.

The first scene opens on a bare stage but for teasers and tormenters, with two trunks and a few boxes and crates scattered about; there could also be hanging sandbags, footlights and perhaps other accouterments to indicate the time period, and these will remain throughout. Subsequent scenes in the Royale return to this setting minus the trunks, etc.

Time: Late August to October 8, 1871

Fortune's Fools

Act I

scene 1

Low, patchy lighting. Jasper is sitting on the edge of a half empty trunk, sipping from a whiskey bottle. Samuel enters with an armful of costumes.

SAMUEL

Get up a second.

Jasper does, Samuel puts the costumes in the trunk and closes it, Jasper sits back down.

JASPER

Is that all, then, the last of it?

SAMUEL

If I missed anything, it can't be too important.

JASPER

Doesn't look like much, a mere pile of boxes. But a good job you've done packing it up, you've earned a bit of rest.

SAMUEL

Would've been a little easier job if I'd had more help.

JASPER

Someone has to direct what happens in the theater, even the saying goodbye. Besides, all this is your bailiwick. You know more about our physical stock than I ever will.

SAMUEL

Unless it suits you to know.

JASPER

Don't be cross with me. Sit and have a nip, we'll hold a proper wake. Here's to what was and what might have been.

SAMUEL

(takes the bottle)

It was fun while it lasted, I'll say that much.

JASPER

Sure, we had a decent run. Nothing lasts forever. "What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?" The Scottish tragedy.

SAMUEL

"I am fortune's fool." Romeo and Juliet.

JASPER

Very good, you've been studying. The bottle, please.

SAMUEL

What do you figure on doing next, Jasper?

JASPER

Why, starting over. What else is there to do?

SAMUEL

You could quit knocking your head against a wall. Folks in this town don't care a hoot about Shakespeare. Most of them never even heard of him.

JASPER

Nonsense, it's a little bad luck we've run into, nothing more. The stars are temporarily lined up against us.

SAMUEL

"The fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

JASPER

Julius Caesar, you have been studying.

SAMUEL

Just reading myself to sleep when I get a chance.

JASPER

The theater's gotten into your blood, and don't deny it.

SAMUEL

The only thing getting in my blood right now is ninety proof. Gimme.

JASPER

A man after my own heart. You always were, Samuel. Why don't you see if you can't scare up a couple of glasses for us, so we don't have to pass the bottle back and forth?

SAMUEL

Why don't you?

JASPER

I think our goblets are in that crate over there. Fetch them out, if you would.

SAMUEL

(going to the crate)

Lord Almighty, ten years since I ran off the plantation, here I am still fetching for the master.

JASPER

Stop your silly prating now! You and I aren't like that. Christ in chains, haven't I treated you like a partner almost? You know full well I have.

(as Samuel returns with two goblets)

I've even told you truthfully what we've taken in on a given night. I've never trusted the rest of the troupe enough to do that.

SAMUEL

The troupe is gone, and good riddance to them. That ornery bunch of outlaws was better suited to a medicine show than Shakespeare. They were pretty much running one in the lobby every night before curtain.

JASPER

They weren't such a bad group, all in all.

SAMUEL

No? Big Bill was nothing but a sneak thief who couldn't keep his hands out of other people's pockets.

JASPER

Too bad about him getting pinched. We lost a good man for the character parts.

SAMUEL

Arnie couldn't keep from making passes at other men's wives. He was damn lucky when that guy who took a shot at him missed.

JASPER

But a fine romantic lead. We'd have had no Romeo without him, no Petruchio, either.

SAMUEL

The rest were no better. Davy running his shell game, Maggie whoring in the box office, Lucy's phony Chinese fortune telling—

JASPER

Now that did no harm in itself, if people were willing to believe in it. After all, she was only trying to add a little something to the till, they all were in their way. If they had their little foibles, they were our fellow thespians and our friends.

SAMUEL

"I do desire we may be better strangers."

JASPER

As You Like It! Samuel, on my word, you'll have me thinking I should have put you on the boards.

SAMUEL

I could do a lot more than mind the costumes and props and set the stage. I know a lot of the plays as well as the rest of them ever did.

JASPER

Is that what you're going on about?

SAMUEL

I'm not going on about anything, it's just a foolish notion I've had. We oughtta get this stuff piled up closer to the door. You gonna help me?

Samuel begins taking boxes offstage.

JASPER

A black man on stage, and with the Bard's own words, yet. It's an unfortunate fact, I own, but I don't know that people would accept such a thing.

SAMUEL

Not likely.

JASPER

I never guessed that was your aim. Tell me, is there a particular part you've had in mind?

SAMUEL

What about Othello? He's supposed to be a Negro, isn't he?

JASPER

The Moor, you want to play the noble Moor?

SAMUEL

I'm more born to it than you with some burnt cork smeared on your face.

JASPER

I've never played Iago, did you know that? And I've always wanted to. My Iago to your Moor, think of the headlines we'd make.

SAMUEL

Doesn't make a damn bit of difference now. We haven't paid the rent in four months, and Cassidy's kicking us out. Says he wants to sell the place.

JASPER

A fellow Irishman at that. I'm sore disappointed in him, he should know better.

SAMUEL

Not his fault. I don't know about Ireland, but everyone in this country thinks of money first. You gonna help me or what?

JASPER

In a minute, in a minute. This idea of yours bears some thinking out.

SAMUEL

What's there to think on? We don't have a chance in hell of starting over, dead broke as we are. We don't even know what we're doing with all this gear. Cassidy will only throw it out if we leave it for him.

JASPER

Taken care of, my lad, taken care of. Think I haven't been working, do you? It happens I've arranged for a livery man, one of your fellows, in fact, who'll pick it up and store it for us for a paltry sum. He even says he's willing to float the bill awhile.

SAMUEL

We'll need to pay him sometime, if we ever want to get the

stuff back. What then?

JASPER

Aye, we come to money again. No doubt you're right about this silly country of yours. But we'll leave that for later. I want to ruminate more about putting a black man on stage.

SAMUEL

It's not gonna happen! I never heard of it happening, and neither did you.

JASPER

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio."

SAMUEL

Hamlet, and that's one thing that just isn't possible. I've made my mind up to it, and you should, too.

JASPER

You're a theater man now, and a true theater man doesn't quit when there's a play to be put on. Let me pour you another dram, the bottle's near empty.

SAMUEL

Listen, Jasper. It's past two years since I came in here looking for work. You were hardly getting started and didn't really have anything for me, I know that, but you took me in for a share, anyway. You taught me about Shakespeare and the theater, and I'm grateful for everything you've done.

JASPER

You're a fine student, and always willing to do the grunt work the others wouldn't.

SAMUEL

I didn't think we could even get it running. Maybe we did because it was new to folks, and somehow we were able to stumble along. Only now we're through. I learned long ago there comes a time to put aside what I want for what I'm gonna need.

JASPER

You're not saying you want to quit me, too? Christ in chains, my right hand, and you'd cut yourself off from me just like that? "This was the most unkindest cut of all."

SAMUEL

Julius Caesar, and not just like that. I've been mulling it

over since I saw us playing Taming of the Shrew to five folks on a good night.

JASPER

I understand what you're saying, sure I'd be a fool not to. But that's the way things have always been for those of us taking up this noble profession. Continuing on is our greatest asset. Your next lesson is to learn just that.

SAMUEL

How are we gonna eat? I don't even have a place to sleep anymore, I've been staying in one of the rooms upstairs from the lobby.

JASPER

Easily solved, I still have my flat. You'll bunk with me.

SAMUEL

You serious? You wouldn't kid me, would you?

JASPER

Have I ever? As to our meals and other needs, there's always a way. Didn't you tell me once how you worked your way north doing odd jobs? And that while there was a war going on. You must have done some fancy footwork to get by in those days.

SAMUEL

I did everything I could think of, and a lot of things I shouldn't have.

JASPER

Samuel, with you on stage, I can see a whole new audience for us, people no one ever thinks about, your people, flocking in to see us. And when other people hear of it, they'll be flocking to see what the fuss is about. We'll make the whole city of Chicago famous, and we'll become famous ourselves, more famous even than that faker Edwin Booth in New York. Why, before long, the whole blessed country will be clamoring for more black men on stage.

SAMUEL

That's an awful lot to think about. Even if I could get on stage, I wouldn't expect that much.

JASPER

You have to see it. Picture yourself in the lights.

Lights come up.

SAMUEL

I have. Ever since I first heard the words, and then read them for myself, I've wanted to say them out loud the way Shakespeare wanted them said. Take them all together, they tell what it is to be a man.

JASPER

Mind you, it's more than the words you have to learn, you need the rhythms of the speech, the moods, too. There's an ocean of work in that alone.

SAMUEL

I can do it, Jasper, you know I can. If I have to take some kind of day job to live, I'll work on it nights.

JASPER

Common labor, for uncommon men such as ourselves? I'm an actor, always have been, and as of now, so are you. We'll find a way to ply our craft, don't you worry about how, you leave that to me. "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." Ha! You don't know it, do you? Henry the Fourth, Part One.

SAMUEL

I'll have to add it to my list.

JASPER

Meanwhile, we'll set the stage for our journey.

The cyc flies in, lit with stars.

SAMUEL

"Such stuff as dreams are made on." The Tempest.

JASPER

Sure, and what use is any of us without a star to chase? None, I tell you, none. Complete the backdrop.

SAMUEL

We should show the city.

Buildings are flown or moved into place in the background.

JASPER

Excellent! You've a real knack for this work, did you know that? What's next?

SAMUEL

Let's try this.

*The saloon comes on, covering
any remaining boxes, etc.,
except one trunk.*

JASPER

Good, good. A likely setting if ever I saw one.

*(pours the last of the whiskey into his
goblet)*

Another dead Protestant. I suppose if we're all set up, we ought to move on, then. As full partners, from here on out.

SAMUEL

Let's just get this last trunk out of the way, partner.

JASPER

We've time yet, our livery man won't be here for a day or two. We'll come back and finish up tomorrow. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow."

SAMUEL

The Scottish tragedy. Grab an end.

JASPER

You've still got a little something to learn about relaxing.

*They exit with the trunk. Stars
out on the cyc.*

scene 2

*Chloe enters the saloon with a
wash tub. She opens the front
door, then begins collecting
empty glasses and bottles. Pete
enters, crosses to the doorway.*

PETE

Hi, Chloe, I figured you'd be here. *(pause)* Looks like we're in for another hot one, and still no rain in sight.

CHLOE

Middle of August, what do you expect? What do you want?

PETE

I come to apologize about last night. You still mad at me?

CHLOE

I put it down to you drinking too much. Far as I'm concerned, last night's over and done with.

PETE

Thanks.

CHLOE

But you ever lay hands on me like that again, I'll do a lot worse than kick you where I did. And I'll tell Miss Francine not to let you drink in here no more. She'll listen to me if I raise enough fuss about it.

PETE

It won't happen again, and I'm sorry it happened last night.

CHLOE

Bet there's still parts of you especially sorry.

PETE

I just don't see why we can't get together like a man and woman should. I run a good livery business, got my storage business on the side, and live in my own flat. There'd be plenty for us both.

CHLOE

I ain't gonna be something else you'd own, Pete.

PETE

But I don't mean it like that. I'm willing to marry you first, you'd be my wife, have my kids.

CHLOE

Like I said.

PETE

Who else you got is gonna give you everything I can?

CHLOE

I don't need a man to give me things, no more than Miss Francine does. Any man gets me is gonna have something bigger in his mind. He's gonna want something special for himself, just like I do for myself, and we'll put his and mine together equal.

PETE

That ain't how the world works, and the sooner you learn it, the better.

CHLOE

I ain't worried about the world, I got my own work to do right now, and so do you.

FRANCINE

(entering with a tin box)

Chloe! I don't pay you to talk with your friends.

CHLOE

No, ma'am. Pete was talking to me while I work.

PETE

Afternoon, Miss Francine.

FRANCINE

(emptying the cash register into the box)

Did you want to see me about something, Pete, or did you come to bother my help?

PETE

I just stopped on my way back from picking up some things for storage. I got them in the wagon.

FRANCINE

Anything good?

PETE

Nothing worth your trouble, ma'am, I looked through it some. Bunch of clothes and what not from Cassidy's playhouse. He's kicking out those actors he had in there.

FRANCINE

Interesting.

CHLOE

You mean they won't be putting on their plays no more? I was all set to go to the next one, I got the money saved for my ticket.

PETE

What would someone like you be doing seeing a play?

CHLOE

I can if I want. They let Negroes sit in the balcony.

PETE

Waste of good money, if you ask me.

CHLOE

I didn't!

FRANCINE

Chloe, bring those glasses in back for washing. Then take out the trash and come back in and sweep up.

CHLOE

Yes, ma'am.

Chloe exits.

FRANCINE

Whatever's going on with you and her, keep it between you and away from my place, unless you don't want to be allowed in anymore.

PETE

Sorry, ma'am. I'll be on my way.

FRANCINE

Wait, I want to know more about Cassidy's playhouse.

PETE

Not much more I can tell you, ma'am, just that he's looking to sell it. Says he don't know why he bought it in the first place, he never could make any money on it.

FRANCINE

Because he hasn't got the brains God gave one of your horses. What's he asking for the building?

PETE

Don't know.

FRANCINE

Find out for me. I'll make it worth your time.

PETE

I don't need money, ma'am, but maybe you'd put a good word in with Chloe for me? She respects you.

FRANCINE

I'm not so sure I like you messing with my help. You might be looking to take her away from me.

PETE

She could still work for you if she was mine, I wouldn't

stop her. Unless you planned on making her one of your upstairs girls, then I'd have to.

Ned enters, crosses to the doorway.

FRANCINE

I don't plan on it, she's valuable where she is. You find out what Cassidy's asking, and if anyone else is interested in that playhouse.

NED

Knock, knock. Can I come in?

FRANCINE

Go on, Pete. Come back when you learn something. If your information's any good, I'll help you out with Chloe, don't you worry.

PETE

Yes, ma'am. And thanks.

Pete exits.

NED

Beats me why you let them people hang around here.

FRANCINE

He pays for his liquor when he drinks.

NED

He wasn't drinking now. What'd he want?

FRANCINE

We were discussing neighborhood business.

NED

Something you oughtta let your favorite alderman in on?

FRANCINE

Your fat little fingers are in enough pies.

NED

Don't be that way, Francine, I thought we were friends.

FRANCINE

What are you doing here so early? After all you had last night, I thought you'd be sleeping it off until tomorrow.

NED

A little booze don't hold me down. I could drink you out of business if I wanted to.

FRANCINE

You'd be losing one of your pies. You must have come for your piece of mine.

NED

Matter of fact, I did, if you won't mind taking care of it now.

FRANCINE

Have a seat.

He sits at a table, she gets the tin box, counts out money for him.

One hundred. That's a lot of money I pay you every week.

NED

Not so much, really, for what I do. This ain't all mine, some of it goes to the patrolmen who ignore what I tell them to ignore.

FRANCINE

Then why don't I pay them directly?

NED

Too late, I already know about the upstairs business. And if I don't get mine, there's no incentive for me to keep the coppers from shutting it down. Our police are dedicated men when I want them to be.

FRANCINE

That's one thing I like about you, Ned, I always know where you stand.

NED

Thanks. Long as you ain't a voter, I'm better off if you know.

FRANCINE

How about a little hair of the dog?

NED

Seeing it's already past lunchtime, don't mind if I do.

*She brings him a shot of
whiskey.*

To your continued good fortune, and mine.

FRANCINE

If I were to expand my business, I assume it would increase both our fortunes.

NED

You expanding both ends, the saloon and upstairs?

FRANCINE

I think I'll keep Francine's the way it is, I'm nostalgic about it. But if I had another, much bigger building, I'd open a second place, one that would include a casino.

*Chloe enters with a broom,
begins slowly sweeping behind
the bar, listening.*

NED

Booze, brothels and betting, the three fastest ways to take a man's money. I like how you think, Francine. Of course, a lot of people take a different view of gambling these days. There's quite a few are after City Hall to shut down all the policy games around town, they sure won't want to see an organized casino go into operation. They tend to favor temperance, too, downstairs and upstairs. They think this oughtta be a moral city, if you'll pardon the expression.

FRANCINE

But we don't worry about what they think, do we?

NED

Most of the time, no, but some of these people are powerful. They have lots of their own money to throw around.

FRANCINE

People like the lovely Mrs. Bleakley and her Abolition of Sin Society.

NED

She's a dear, God-fearing woman.

FRANCINE

Who scares the hell out of you. Rather, the thought of losing all the money she inherited does.

NED

Let's just say I prefer to step carefully around her. Where exactly is the bigger building you're talking about?

FRANCINE

I hear Cassidy wants to sell his playhouse.

NED

The Royale? Property like that will cost a pretty penny.

FRANCINE

I can come up with enough, I have a few friends who'd want in. Some of them might even be holding public office.

NED

But how do we fight off the temperance types? Our casino would be in pretty plain sight.

FRANCINE

What if we kept the stage and audience sections as cover? Say we occasionally held civic or charitable events, we'd think of something. I happen to know there are two floors of rooms above the lobby that could be converted to other uses.

NED

That's a thought, a real good thought.

FRANCINE

It's in the city's interest that the right person takes possession of the Royale.

NED

Building like that, I think the City Council would want to vote on who gets it and what use it's put to.

FRANCINE

And you have the influence to make sure they vote the right way.

NED

It'll take a lot of grease for them wheels.

FRANCINE

Once I'm up and running, I'll be able to afford all the grease you need.

Chloe bumps the bar, makes noise.

Chloe! What are you doing there?

CHLOE
Sweeping up, like you told me, ma'am.

FRANCINE
How much did you hear?

CHLOE
Nothing, ma'am, I only just this second come in.

NED
I gotta get to a Council meeting, Francine. I got the gist of what you're saying about, uh, making neighborhood improvements. We'll talk later.

FRANCINE
Fine, Ned.

He exits.

I like to keep my business affairs private, Chloe.

CHLOE
Yes, ma'am.

FRANCINE
My employees do the same, or they don't work for me.

CHLOE
No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am. I didn't hear nothing, and I wouldn't say nothing if I did. I swear it.

FRANCINE
You're a smart girl, I like you. But I can make things awfully hard on people I don't like. You understand?

CHLOE
Yes, ma'am, and you don't have to worry about me.

FRANCINE
Good. And just to show you how I treat the people I like, here's an extra ten dollars on top of your pay. You spend it on something nice for yourself.

CHLOE
Thank you, ma'am, I will. Thank you.

FRANCINE

Go on up and wake the girls, it's time they had breakfast and got to work. Straighten the rooms up after they leave.

CHLOE

Right away, ma'am.

Chloe exits.

FRANCINE

She's smart, alright, plenty smart.

*Francine exits with the tin box.
Samuel enters with a bench and a book. He sends the saloon off, then sits and reads.*

scene 3

Chloe enters, stops as Samuel rises and begins speaking.

SAMUEL

"Give me your hand. This hand is moist, my lady."

(pause for Desdemona's line)

"This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart. Hot, hot and moist. This hand of yours requires a sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer, much castigation and exercise devout; for here's a young devil here, that commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand, a frank one."

CHLOE

Are you talking about my hands?

SAMUEL

Huh? Oh, no, I was just— I didn't know anyone was there.

CHLOE

What are you doing?

SAMUEL

Working. What are you doing?

CHLOE

I'm just coming from work. I always walk through the park on my way home.

SAMUEL

You can go on, I won't hurt you. Sorry if I scared you.

CHLOE

I ain't scared.

SAMUEL

Good.

CHLOE

So what kind of work are you doing where they make you talk like you were?

SAMUEL

Acting, I'm an actor.

CHLOE

You mean like in a play?

SAMUEL

That's just what I mean. I'm not actually in a play yet, but I'm studying for one.

CHLOE

I never knew a Negro could be an actor.

SAMUEL

I'm a free man, I can be whatever I want.

CHLOE

I was almost gonna see a real live play. I have the money for my ticket, and with the extra Miss Francine just gave me, I could've bought a new dress and everything. But now I found out they closed the playhouse down.

SAMUEL

You don't mean Cassidy's place, the one called the Royale?

CHLOE

Yes, the Royale. Some friends of mine have been, they were allowed to sit in the balcony. Oh, they said it was grand. What are you laughing at?

SAMUEL

Not at you, honest. I think it's nice you wanted to see a play. To me, it says something nice about the kind of person you are.

CHLOE

What's your name?

SAMUEL

Samuel Jenkins. What's yours?

CHLOE

Chloe.

SAMUEL

That's it, just Chloe, no second name?

CHLOE

No. I know most of us have them now. How did you get yours?

SAMUEL

Took it from the brand of whiskey I drank the night I ran off free from the plantation.

CHLOE

This man I know, Pete, he told me his father was a runaway. He took the name Smith, 'cause that's the kind of work he did when he came here. Now Pete's a smith and a Smith, too. Guess it would either be Pete Smith or Pete Livery.

SAMUEL

Why don't you take a second name?

CHLOE

I'm intending to, soon as I find one suits me. What do you think would be a good name for me?

SAMUEL

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet."

CHLOE

So I smell sweet, do I?

SAMUEL

Sweet enough. But the fella said that wasn't talking about smells, he was talking about names.

CHLOE

What fella?

SAMUEL

Romeo. You never heard about Romeo and Juliet?