

A
KINGDOM
FOR A
STAGE

*Two hours traffic
in honour of the four hundredth anniversary
of the death of William Shakespeare*

TONY DIGGLE



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INTRODUCTION

OR HOW THE PLAY CAME TO BE WRITTEN

One point that must be made straight away is that the scenes depicting aspects of Shakespeare's life are not history. In his recent book on Stratford-upon-Avon, Nicholas Fogg points out that unlike many of his contemporaries, major aspects of Shakespeare's life can be traced, but that much of this information records the author's dealings and endeavours, rather than telling us anything about his personality.¹ These scenes do nothing more than make up a story around what we know, and just as importantly, what we don't know.

The event that led to this play being written occurred nearly fifty years ago. My late aunt was a liberal studies lecturer at a teacher training college, and at the end of the summer term there was always a staff / student production. As a teenager I used to go, and one year they did three short plays by Shaw, of which "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets" was the first. It was done so well that even now in my mind's eye I can recall moments from it. This play would never have been written if I hadn't seen that production. At the time I was most fascinated by the idea of Shakespeare picking up his best lines by copying down what other people had said, but I never forgot the *raison d'être* of the play. Shaw wrote it in 1910 to raise money for the Shakespeare Memorial National

1 FOGG, Nicholas, *Stratford-upon-Avon The Biography*, Amberley, 2014, p. 30

Theatre, and in the play Shakespeare pleads with Elizabeth I for a National Theatre from the public purse for the better instruction and gracing of her subjects, arguing that the writing of plays is a great matter in forming the minds and affections of men.

Shakespeare lived in the middle of an era when the English language shook off its stiffness and inadequacy and became much more flexible and expressive, and the development of literature and drama in this period was perhaps the greatest the world had ever seen. This was mirrored by developments in science: 1543 had seen the publication of Vesalius' anatomical drawings, the first translation of Archimedes, and "The Revolution of the Heavenly Orbs" by Copernicus. Men could no longer think the same way. Galileo was born in the same year as Shakespeare, and was developing the scientific method of "doing the experiment and publishing the results" during his lifetime.

But it was also an era when expanding trade and the needs of rulers meant that more complex systems of finance were needed, and the international bourses (notably the one at Antwerp) or money markets also date from this time. And while this facilitated the development of trade, it also led to speculative manias and instability. Where once wealth had gone hand in hand with responsibility and stewardship and the great Tudor houses had kept large numbers of retainers, these were increasingly replaced by wage labour and short-term hirings. The historian Geoffrey Elton wrote:

"The excessive preoccupation of the Elizabethans with the order of the universe and the fixed degrees of man reflects less the memory of the disturbed politics of the 15th century than an awareness of the

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instability of their own day when society was being dragged from its moorings by new ideas, new worlds and – most basically of all – new wealth and new poverty.”²

In short an age that promised so much led under the arguably poor kingship of both James I and Charles I to a society so divided that it couldn't escape a civil war in mid-seventeenth century, never mind the wars and religious clashes that were going on elsewhere in the world.

Even with nothing more than this most simple, skeletal outline of some of the forces driving the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, the parallels with the present day are uncomfortable.

But at least the people of the world four hundred years ago didn't have anything like the infrastructure, knowledge and resources that we have today to deal with issues on an international scale.

Once again, we live in an age in which the new technologies, properly harnessed, offer the ability in the near future to provide for the needs of all mankind and a great deal more. Yet at the same time, ordinary people are alienated from their leaders, the public debate is too often conducted in terms of narrow political economy, or matters purely financial, and different value systems are still unable to accommodate each other. And what of governments through which these challenges must be addressed if they are to be overcome? In his recent book, Matthew Burrows, a former counsellor to the U.S. National Intelligence Council, points out that in the U.S., crisis management still crowds out longer

2 ELTON, G R, *England under the Tudors*, Methuen & Co., 1963, p. 261

range strategising, but that his government is not alone in trying to get ahead of the curve. Everybody else is equally swamped.³

Theatre may not hold the place in the forming of the minds and affections of men that it held in Shakespeare's day, but it was Hamlet who said:

“Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unsus'd”

We, the judges, should bear a warier eye.

Tony Diggle

3 BURROWS, Matthew, *The Future, Declassified*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 6.

PRODUCTION NOTE

When I wrote the play, I envisaged it being done with a few backdrops, and little in the way of any formal set with the exception of the occasional bench, table or chair. The director of the Chelsea Theatre production, however, envisaged the “purgatory” in which Shakespeare and his peers are discovered at the beginning of the play as a “rest home for aging actors”. It is really up to the director of the production to decide how he wants to do it: it is a play which can be done any number of ways in the “black box”.

Even the few props mentioned in the text should be regarded as indicative. A spinning globe of the world is necessary for Act 2 Scene 2, and a sign showing that Act 2 Scene 3 is taking place in the Swan and Maidenhead Inn might be helpful (although even this was dispensed with in the original production). Otherwise props can be used, changed or not used at all as the case may be. A great deal can be done with good lighting and sound effects.

The action of the play
takes place in three locations

- i) The Heavens, Literary Department
- ii) Elizabethan and Stuart London and Stratford
- iii) Contemporary London

Time: The early twenty-first century (after 23rd April, 2016)

ACT 1

- Scene 1: The Heavens, Literary Department
Scene 2: Fields behind Henley Street, Stratford, 1592
Scene 3: The Heavens, Literary Department
Scene 4: London, early twenty-first century
Scene 5: The Heavens, Literary Department

ACT 2

(THE PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY) SET IN THE HEAVENS

- Scene 1: London, early twenty-first century
Scene 2: Shakespeare on Trial
Scene 3: The Swan and Maidenhead,
Stratford, 26th March, 1616

The Epilogue

DOUBLING PLOT

LIST OF CHARACTERS

(for the purpose of establishing doubling)

The play has 40 characters, but has been written for performance by 11 actors: 7 male actors and 4 female actors.

In addition the voices of two children (Hamnet and Judith SHAKESPEARE aged 7) are heard in Act 1 Scene 2.

Note: The play can obviously accommodate more actors in total and more female actors specifically if a greater number of actors are available and the casting is done differently.

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS

(3 MALE ACTORS, 2 FEMALE ACTORS)

William SHAKESPEARE (m)

Ben JONSON (m)

Christopher MARLOWE (m)

Anne HATHAWAY (f)

PUCK (f)

CHILD CHARACTERS

(Heard not seen and to be played by members of the company)

Hamnet SHAKESPEARE, aged 7

Judith SHAKESPEARE, aged 7

OTHER CHARACTERS

MEPHISTOPHELES)	
FISSION)	
PRESENTER)	Female Actor 3
POOR WOMAN)	
SECOND MAID)	
Susanna SHAKESPEARE)	
FIRST MAID)	
FUSION)	
SMALL INVESTOR)	Female Actor 4
FOURTH CITIZEN)	
FOURTH JOURNALIST)	
LECHERY)	
George Bernard SHAW)	Male Actor 4
DEADLY SIN)	
ANGEL)	
BONUS)	
FIRST JOURNALIST)	
FIRST CITIZEN)	Male Actor 5
OFFICIAL)	
Michael DRAYTON)	
DEADLY SIN)	

William SHAKESPEARE,)	
as a young man)	
ENTERPRISE)	
SECOND JOURNALIST)	Male Actor 6
SECOND CITIZEN)	
Alderman PARSONS)	
DEADLY SIN)	

John SHAKESPEARE)	
TREASURY)	
THIRD JOURNALIST)	Male Actor 7
THIRD CITIZEN)	
POOR MAN)	
DEADLY SIN)	

ACT 1

Scene 1

The Heavens, Literary Department

(Enter the entire cast. William SHAKESPEARE and ANNE Hathaway stand in the centre arm in arm. They sing the first verse from the “Winter” song of “Love’s Labour’s Lost”.)

CHORUS: When icicles hang by the wall,
 And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
 And Tom bears logs into the hall,
 And milk comes frozen home in pail,
 When blood is nipp’d, and ways be foul.
 Then nightly sings the staring owl:

(During the final three lines, ANNE relinquishes her arm and she and the CHORUS exit. SHAKESPEARE sits down in a chair centre stage dead to his world.)

‘Tu-who;
Tu-whit, Tu-who’ – A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

(For the first few moments of the play, the audience will not realise who or where SHAKESPEARE or any of the other characters are. A door seems to slam off-stage.)

JONSON *(Off-stage)* Hullo! Anybody about?

(Ben JONSON enters stage right.)

ACT 1

JONSON Ah, Will, might have known you'd be in evidence. Good to see you. How's things? What's been going on while I've been away? (*Realises SHAKESPEARE is not taking any of this in.*) Will? (*He waves his hands in front of his eyes.*) What's the matter? Are you all right? (*He snaps his fingers repeatedly, but there is still no response. Christopher MARLOWE and George Bernard SHAW rush in stage left.*)

MARLOWE Ben?

SHAW Thank goodness you're back, Mr. Jonson. Maybe we'll get a response out of him.

JONSON What in heaven's name is going on?

SHAW (*To SHAKESPEARE*) Will. Will. Ben's come back. Your old friend, Ben. Come to see you. You remember Ben, don't you? (*There is no response from SHAKESPEARE.*) Your old sparring partner. You remember. The sparkling debates you used to have in the Mermaid Tavern. The man of high learning against the man of wit and invention. How everyone used to enjoy themselves drinking and laughing. It's no good.

MARLOWE I don't believe he's upset at all. He's just acting again. He's suddenly going to jump up and say "fooled you". I know him. He always has to have the last laugh.

SHAW No. It's been going on for far too long.

(*PUCK enters stage left.*)

SCENE 1

PUCK Has he come round yet?

JONSON Puck! You here too? (*Suddenly changes his tone.*)
All right, what's been going on? (*They all look sheepish.*)
Can't I even go away for three months to talk to the
romantics in the eighteenth century without you all
getting into trouble... Marlowe, I suppose you're to
blame for this.

MARLOWE That's just typical! You haven't heard a shred
of evidence yet, and already I'm to blame. It's his own
fault. His exuberance is just too much at times. It
all just seems to bounce off him. When did he ever
really take a stand? And what right has he got to pass
judgement on everything?

JONSON What has been going on?

MARLOWE You and I, Ben, we didn't just write. You were
a soldier. While he dallied with a dark lady, I was
involved in the darkest affairs of state.

JONSON All right, calm down! What about you, Mr Shaw?
There's always trouble when you come on a visit.
Why don't you stay in the twentieth century where
you belong? Would I be right in thinking you had an
argument with him?

SHAW Well, sort of – not so much an argument – more
an exchange.

JONSON I see.

ACT 1

SHAW Well, Marlowe's right, he gets insufferable. But it was Puck made it possible. He couldn't have done it without his assistance.

JONSON Done what?

PUCK He got out.

JONSON What!

PUCK I helped him.

JONSON Where did you go?

PUCK Back down there, of course.

JONSON But was it authorised?

PUCK No.

JONSON No! You know we're not allowed out unless they want us to go. I'm not surprised he's in trouble. And I'm not surprised you're at the bottom of it. It's been hard enough getting used to the fact that you're real, let alone getting accustomed to your special powers.

PUCK I don't see what's so difficult to understand. You're a human condemned to live for ever after your death up here. I'm a spirit condemned to live for ever in both places after my transgression.

SCENE 1

MARLOWE Fall's the word you're looking for, Puck. Not transgression.

PUCK No. Not fall. I haven't been cast out. They just thought I was getting too mischievous. Anyway, that's not the worst of it.

JONSON What do you mean?

PUCK When we got down there, he misbehaved.

JONSON What!

PUCK He intervened.

JONSON That's unpardonable. How?

PUCK We cast a few spells.

JONSON We cast a few spells?

PUCK Only little ones. Only a few. Just to give him some ideas. Just to test the water. It's amazing what fools those mortals still are!

JONSON With you around, I'm not surprised!

PUCK I only put a little juice into a few eyes. Afterwards they only thought they'd had a bad dream. Of course, we weren't intervening really. We only thought we were. Oh, they've got it set up very cleverly. I'm sure they planned the whole thing.

ACT 1

JONSON So what happened?

PUCK We came back.

JONSON What did the Angel on the Gate say when you came back in?

PUCK Nothing. He just sat there with a stone face.

JONSON That was a bit of a let off, wasn't it?

PUCK Oh, but he was all right then. Nothing much had happened at that stage. The trouble only started when we put his play on.

JONSON Put his play on!

PUCK That's what all this led to. He wrote another one when we came back. Shakespeare's thirty-eighth play.

JONSON Oh, I'd like to see that!

MARLOWE Don't bank on it, Ben, you haven't read it yet.

SHAW Marlowe didn't like it, and that's when they had this big argument.

JONSON So it was your fault?

MARLOWE It was not my fault. Shaw didn't like it either.

SCENE 1

SHAW But I didn't have a big argument with him. You exploded! Taking over his characters like that!

PUCK I've never seen him in such a state. He was cowering on the floor.

JONSON Taking over his characters? Cowering on the floor?

PUCK I thought you were going to kill him.

MARLOWE Don't exaggerate. Besides you can't kill anything up here. That's the trouble. You can't even kill time. Who'd have thought it? Neither heaven nor hell, but condemned for ever to watch the future, dimly, from a distance, through a glass darkly, because we didn't mould ours well enough.

SHAW And there we were all at each others throats. And, of course, just at that moment the Angel chose to put in an appearance. Oh, they've set it up very cleverly.

PUCK It was the horrible one who usually does Saturday nights.

(Enter ANGEL)

ANGEL Did I hear my name?

*(PUCK, JONSON, MARLOWE and SHAW
are immediately submissive.)*

ACT 1

ANGEL So nice to be popular. Everything all right? Puck?

PUCK Yes, yes.

(ANGEL walks around.)

ANGEL Marlowe?

MARLOWE Yes, yes.

ANGEL What about you, Jonson?

JONSON Oh yes, yes.

ANGEL Shaw?

(SHAW nods weakly.)

ANGEL And Shakespeare? *(SHAKESPEARE does not react. ANGEL laughs grimly. He moves towards the exit, and turns to survey them all. He laughs again and exits.)*

SHAW *(to SHAKESPEARE)* Will! Will! Wake up. *(There is no response.)*

JONSON Look, this is all still about as clear as mud to me. Puck! *(They all converge at the side of the stage.)* Now, you say you went back down there. Let me see. How far have they got?

PUCK The early twenty-first century.

SCENE 1

JONSON The early twenty-first century. And why did you want to go there?

PUCK Because they've put his Globe up again. Ever since they've put it back he's wanted to go and see what London was like today. And then with all the celebrations for the four hundredth anniversary of his death he couldn't resist the chance any longer.

JONSON So what happened when you got there?

SHAKESPEARE *(slowly)* I lost my reputation.

(They all jump and turn round.)

JONSON What! He spoke!

SHAW Oh, Will, Will, welcome back!

(JONSON and SHAW rush to SHAKESPEARE.)

SHAW Will, here's Ben come back specially to see you.

JONSON Hello, Will.

SHAW Oh, we'll be all right now he's spoken.

SHAKESPEARE The fault lies in ourselves.

JONSON What's he saying? He's rambling in his plays. That's not a good sign.

ACT 1

SHAW Ask him about his new one.

JONSON I hear you've written another play.

SHAKESPEARE (*nodding*) You'll see what I mean.

JONSON What's he saying? Do you want me to read it then?

SHAKESPEARE (*vaguely*) You'll see what I mean.

SHAW He's still very weak. We'd better not tire him too much.

SHAKESPEARE (*suddenly gets up with a great effort*) A turn or two I'll walk to still my beating mind.

(*PUCK helps him off stage.*)

SHAW Walking already! He'll be as right as rain in no time.

(*Exeunt PUCK and SHAKESPEARE.*)

JONSON You were telling me what happened.

SHAW Sit down, Ben. I will tell you the full story.

(*JONSON and MARLOWE take seats at the back of the stage upstage left and right.*)

SHAW It all started when he told me he was determined to go back to the present day. I tried to dissuade him from going, but, of course, he was at his most exuberant then. I felt obliged to give him a bit of stick.

SCENE 1

(*Re-enter SHAKESPEARE.*)

SHAW It's the first time you've ever shown any interest in the future. You know we aren't supposed to go without permission.

SHAKESPEARE Oh, Mr Shaw, how can you be such a misery? They put my Globe up again, and you expect me not to want to go and see it in its new age? I might even be inspired to write something. My fingers are already itching for a quill!

SHAW Will, I think this is most unwise.

SHAKESPEARE But it's because of you that I'm going! I'm so much in your debt.

SHAW My debt?

SHAKESPEARE Yes, in the debt of you and others for putting forward the idea of a Shakespeare National Theatre to keep my plays in repertory, and – (*deprecatingly*) to revive whatever else is vital in English drama.

SHAW What has that got to do with it?

SHAKESPEARE Without all that lobbying, even I might have passed into oblivion—

SHAW Oh, just listen to him.

SHAKESPEARE —before we got to the rebuilding of

ACT 1

Shakespeare's Globe, dedicated to the experience and understanding of my plays in performance.

SHAW They don't want it.

SHAKESPEARE Pardon.

SHAW They don't want it. The English people don't want it. They didn't want the British Museum; they didn't want Westminster Abbey, and they certainly didn't want the National Theatre. Oh, they've got used to them now. But they didn't want them, and of all the things they didn't want, they certainly didn't want the Globe.

SHAKESPEARE But it has been rebuilt now.

SHAW And did they get it right? Is it the true Globe?

SHAKESPEARE (*looks down uneasily*) Not bad. Anyway the detail doesn't matter. The atmosphere is true. It's alive! It's life in the raw!

SHAW It's an Elizabethan fossil full o' tourists.

SHAKESPEARE (*Pause*) You don't like it then.

SHAW And I say more. It's another indication of your tendency to look backwards.

SHAKESPEARE Pardon?

SHAW You sought inspiration from the past. As I've

SCENE 1

always said, you never showed any concern for contemporary social problems. It's I who should want to go. It was I who thought the past was no use unless you applied it to the problems of the present. As I did when I wrote my little interlude about your Dark Lady, my little piece in aid of establishing your Shakespeare National Theatre when you confronted great Elizabeth, Harry Tudor's daughter.

SHAKESPEARE Well, enough.

SHAW Your characters had no political views or convictions of any sort. They were puppets, not people.

SHAKESPEARE Come, come, Mr. Shav, yours were only mouthpieces of social criticism rather than rounded individuals.

SHAW Huh! At least there was some social criticism.

SHAKESPEARE Why don't you admit it? You were really interested in the same things as I was, the importance of order and direction in society.

SHAW Amen to that! But as the Virgin Queen said to you in my little play, whether man has yet learnt that he cannot live by bread alone...

SHAKESPEARE Why the rebuilding of the Globe proves they have! (*SHAW exclaims in astonishment.*) Your Virgin Queen said that it would be three hundred years and more, and now on the stroke of four hundred,

ACT 1

not only are there theatres at the public charge but the Globe itself is back in place. Oh, I can't wait to get down there. (*Shouting offstage*) Puck!

SHAW I rather think you're looking through rose-tinted clouds. What do you suppose you've been looking at up here for centuries?

SHAKESPEARE We can't see properly from up here. (*Looking down*) Why, look, we can't see a thing at the moment: the climate's still full of fogs.

SHAW That's not all that's still the same.

SHAKESPEARE I'm sure everything's much better really. Puck!

SHAW I can see there'll be no satisfying you until you've gone and had a proper look. Well, if it's all as wonderful as you think, all the theatres will need to do is make sure people don't forget the folly of the past. Your traditional irrelevancies will do nicely. (*SHAKESPEARE looks furious.*) If, on the other hand, the odd issue still remains to be resolved, perhaps your worthy pen could manage to address it this time round. Marlowe will hoot with laughter when he hears what you've been saying.

SHAKESPEARE Puck!

SHAW (*going off*) It was hopeless. There was no getting through to him. He wasn't listening. (*Exit SHAW.*)

SCENE 1

SHAKESPEARE Puck, where are you?

PUCK (*joining SHAKESPEARE centre stage*) Gentle master!

SHAKESPEARE There you are! Where on earth have you been?

PUCK On earth. I've only just got back from my last job.

SHAKESPEARE It's good to see you again, my airy spirit.

PUCK (*warily*) Master?

SHAKESPEARE Um, dost think we could once more become merry wanderers of the night? (*Points downwards*)

PUCK My lord, you know you're not supposed to.

SHAKESPEARE Yes, but I mean we're condemned to see the future from up here where we can only get the general picture: surely they won't mind if we go down there just to have a proper look at it?

PUCK I don't know. I'm not specifically assigned to you any more. I don't recall a lot of what I did all those years ago, but remember that I did thee some service.

SHAKESPEARE But unlike Ariel you made mistakes.

PUCK My lord, that was all part of the fun.

SHAKESPEARE Then for old times' sake, mistak'st once more.

ACT 1

PUCK Just to have a look then. Promise me you'll do no more than that.

SHAKESPEARE (*smoothly*) Of course.

PUCK Then, for a merry hour, my lord, thou speakest right.

(*SHAKESPEARE and PUCK start moving off stage left.*)

SHAKESPEARE (*enthusiastically*) Oh, Puck, when I think of all the hopes I had when I set out the first time, all the optimism, all the opportunities I dreamed of, all the things there were to explore: it's bringing it all back!

(*Dissonant music indicates a change of atmosphere.*)

MARLOWE But that wasn't the whole picture, was it, Will?