William Shakespeare's Land of the Dead

A true and accurate account of the 1599 zombie plague

by John Heimbuch

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
Founded 1830

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S LAND OF THE DEAD was originally performed on August 2, 2008 at the Rarig Thrust Stage in Minneapolis during the Minnesota Fringe Festival. It was directed by Amy Rummenie and produced by Walking Shadow Theatre Company, with the following cast:

WILL KEMP . . . . . Craig Anderson
KATE BRAITHWAITE . . . . . Ariana Prusak
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE . . . . . John Heimbuch
RICHARD BURBAGE . . . . . Keith Prusak
JOHN RICE . . . . . Michael Curran-Dorsano
JOHN SINKLO . . . . . David Pisa
FRANCIS BACON . . . . . Joseph Papke
SIR ROBERT CECIL . . . . . Shad Cooper
QUEEN ELIZABETH . . . . . Ellen Karsten
DOCTOR JOHN DEE . . . . . Jeff Huset
SOLDIER 1 . . . . . Eric Zuelke
SOLDIER 2 . . . . . Jen Zalar
AFFLICTED AND OTHERS . . . . . Christopher Bauleke, Jon Cole, Katherine Glover, Andrew Northrop, Valerie Rigsby, Erin Sheppard, Jennifer Walker

CHARACTERS

THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN'S MEN

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (35) – Player, playwright, company member

RICHARD BURBAGE (31) – Player and theatre manager

WILL KEMP (40s) – Player, clown, and Morris dancer

JOHN RICE (teens) – An apprentice player

KATE BRAITHWAITE (30s) – The attiring woman

JOHN SINKLO (30s) – A hired player

THE QUEEN'S COURT

FRANCIS BACON (38) – Lawyer, courier, philosopher

SIR ROBERT CECIL (36) – The Queen's spymaster

QUEEN ELIZABETH (65) – The Queen of England

DOCTOR JOHN DEE (71) – An astrologer and mathematician

SOLDIER 1 – A recruiting officer

SOLDIER 2 – A soldier of the Queen's guard

ADDITIONAL PLAYERS/SOLDIERS/AFFLICTED AS NEEDED

SETTING

Summer 1599. Southwark, England. In the tiring house of the newly built Globe Playhouse after the inaugural performance of William Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth.*

"He that undertaketh the story of a time, especially of any length, cannot but meet with many blanks and spaces which he must be forced to fill up out of his own wit and conjecture."

- Francis Bacon,
The Advancement of Learning,
1620

For Matthew Kuzma and Katherine Fines

ACT I

DUSK

(The lights come up [LIGHT CUE 1] to reveal the backstage of the Globe playhouse – a candlelit changing room with a table, benches, and chairs, as well as chests, barrels, and baskets for storage. Littered around the tiring house are the costumes, props and weapons of Shakespeare's Henry the Fifth. *Entrances include a door leading outside, steps going upstairs, and a curtained alcove leading onto the playhouse stage - through which we hear Act V of* Henry the Fifth *being performed.)*

*(***WILL KEMP** *enters from the street. He is plainly dressed with Morris bells upon his legs. He listens to the performance.)*

*(***KATE** *enters with a wicker basket. She hears* **KEMP**, *but doesn't look up. She continues her chores.)*

KATE. Hallo, noisemaker! I can hear those bells stage left. And if it's young Master Rice, I'll thank you not to clatter the properties when you've an entrance to make.

KEMP. Never pass a chance to give a good scold, do you my Kate?

KATE. Will Kemp!

KEMP. Ah-haha! She lives, does she? My Katherine-Katherine-Kate. I wondered if Burbage would be kind enough to unscrew you from your sticking place when he tore down that decrepit Shoreditch pit they called the Theatre. But I see my little fixture has already been installed in the Globe.

KATE. What are you doing here? They'll be in the tiring house as soon as the play ends, and I doubt Master Shakespeare would be glad to see you. Today of all days.

KEMP. Shakerags can spit for all it's worth. I heard the talk all through London – Shakespeare's History of Henry the Fifth to open the Globe – so when I saw the banner raised today, I thought I'd see what he's done with my play now that Falstaff's not in it! And perchance give the good people a taste of what's missing.

KATE. Kemp, don't tell me you've come for a jig. Oh, God's wounds, you have.

KEMP. I confess 'twill be a touch jig-like. Behold in me the Nine Days Wonder!

KATE. Nine Days Wonder, what foolishness is that?

KEMP. Nay, ask not, but listen and be amazed!

KATE. You aren't going out there.

KEMP. You can be certain I am. At the end of part two did I not say Falstaff would return, by the playwright's own words? The Chamberlain's Men may be contentedly false, but I'll not let them make a liar of Kemp.

KATE. Will! This is no longer your Company and these not your roles! Shakespeare's already killed Falstaff off, what would he say if you barge onstage to grace his new Globe with your unwelcome legs?

KEMP. Don't think you'll thwart me my sweet Kate-o-nine tails. These unwelcome legs fought fraught Shoreditch streets to trod the boards - as all London talks of Irish wars and Spanish fleets. Even now I did yet 'scape a brawl. Near Surgeon's Hall I passed the rough remnant of an old tavern fight where some crazed jack-o-bedlam with blood-streaming lip and limbs all a-thrashing fell on me in fervor, but these true legs - which you would disparage - did bestow him such a kick that he collapsed on the street, whilst I, unscathed, did hie myself here to sit in a tavern over a middling cup of sack till that murderous William's two hours traffic had passed.

(A loud explosion is heard [SOUND CUE 1]. Like cannon-fire, or a nearby building collapsing.)

KATE. Now that's quite a sound!

KEMP. Was it not from the play?

KATE. No. Perhaps it was some regimental cannonry. There's a drill field nearby.

KEMP. Oh, there's an idea – let's build a playhouse in a marshy Southwark drill field. How very like Burbage. I bet the land was cheap. Who crosses the river to take in a play?

KATE. Well, I pray it desists.

KEMP. Pray a bit harder, else you may have to go tell the regiment that they disrupt a new play by Will Shakespeare. And failing that, bring it straight to the Queen.

KATE. I may do, if she persists to wage such noisome wars.

('Onstage' the play draws to a close. As the actors bow, there is a burst of applause and stamping from the audience [SOUND CUE 2]. **KEMP** *straightens his clothing.)*

KEMP. Hark the applause!

KATE. Kemp, I say don't!

KEMP. Alas dear Kate, my sweet-tongued shrew, these bells give me deafness to all but my cue - so till after my entrance I bid thee adieu!

*(***KEMP** *greets the Lord Chamberlain's Men as they enter from the stage, including* **BURBAGE***, the capable manager of the Chamberlain's Men, dressed as Hal;* **RICE***, an apprentice player in his early teens, dressed as Katharine; and* **SINKLO***, dressed as the King of France. Through the following, the Players remove their costumes and get dressed.)*

*(***SHAKESPEARE***, dressed as Burgundy/Chorus, enters last.)*

KEMP. My most notable Shakerags!

SHAKESPEARE. Kemp!

*(***KEMP** *slides past* **SHAKESPEARE** *and heads onstage, where he begins to deliver his Nine Days Wonder speech.)*

BURBAGE. Shakespeare, leave him be.

SHAKESPEARE. Damn it, Burbage, what is he doing here?

KATE. He told me he was here to do a jig of sorts.

SHAKESPEARE. A jig!

BURBAGE. Kate.

SHAKESPEARE. And you didn't stop him?

KATE. Aye, there's a thought – stop Master Kemp once he's made up his mind. Stop him yourself if it matters to you. Master Sinkler, how many times must I ask you hired men not to throw your shirts on the floor?

BURBAGE. Will, I made it quite clear that Kemp not do a jig. A speech, nothing more.

SHAKESPEARE. You knew of this? And still you'd allow him to mar our inaugural show in the Globe, after what he's done?

BURBAGE. Oh please, Will, enough. We all know the cause. Kemp caught me in the Mermaid and asked to promote some wonder of his.

SHAKESPEARE. What wonder is this?

BURBAGE. Some dance or other, I saw no harm.

RICE. Is this Will Kemp the clown?

KATE. The same, Master John. Now be off with your wig.

RICE. I saw him play Falstaff and Bottom the Weaver. I thought he was funny.

SHAKESPEARE. Gather some years and you'll learn to feel different.

BURBAGE. Beware of your bite, William, the boy means no harm.

SHAKESPEARE. I needn't say more. Burbage can tell you just how comic Kemp is.

BURBAGE. Will.

KATE. They both have their gifts, no mistake, little John – but let this be proof, two strong Wills can never work well together.

SHAKESPEARE. It wouldn't be an issue if the damned prancing fool had just kept to the script. And when I kindly insisted that he stick to the page, he raised such a stink we had to cancel three shows!

BURBAGE. Look, Will. I barred him from playing, but I don't see the harm in promoting his work.

SHAKESPEARE. No? He's playing for Alleyn now! Imagine he discovered our prompt script, and brought it to Ned with Falstaff stuck back in it. What harm it would be if Ned Alleyn played your King Henry?

BURBAGE. Oh.

RICE. Could he do that?

SHAKESPEARE. Don't think he wouldn't.

KATE. He could but he won't.

SHAKESPEARE. You don't know Kemp as I do, my Kate.

KATE. It's still well enough. You may not like him, but that don't mean he's a thief.

SHAKESPEARE. See if he's not, Mistress Kate, and I will eat my words.

KATE. You certainly chew them enough.

BURBAGE. Will, there's nothing to gain by holding a grudge. We've both known Kemp since we had no beard – I think it only meet that we buy him a drink. All difference aside, he is still a friend.

(A burst of laughter and applause from the stage [SOUND CUE 3]. **KEMP** *returns, dancing his way in.)*

KEMP. Aye, that'll give them a taste! And so my jig is up. Hey nonny good friends – some months hence and another bank of the Thames sees you all well met! A fine playhouse you've built. Sinklo, still hale as ever. Is that Condell and Heminges? – ah-ha! Hey, Burbage, my thanks – there's many now eager to see the Morris itself.

BURBAGE. Indeed, Kemp. I hope you are well.

KEMP. Oh, well enough. I'm playing with Ned again – courteous of him to have me back after all these years. Ah,

you remember dear Shakes, how we played them back when Marlowe still held a pen? Why quiet, my glum little Shakestaff? I warn you now, silence is not so great a defense as you might suppose.

SHAKESPEARE. It's good to see you again, Kemp.

KEMP. Oh-ho, is that so, dear William the Second? And the same to you, if you say so. Now friends, let's drink your success in taking the Globe, may it please your creditors as much as it please you!

(The players cheer. They continue to change clothes.)

BURBAGE. Our creditors have every reason to be happy tonight!

KEMP. Not after we find the tavern, they won't. *(spookily)* They're coming to get you Burbage!

BURBAGE. Peace Kemp! I'll buy you that drink. To your great Morris and our new playhouse crowned by the reign of fierce Henry! Tonight at the Mermaid, the shareholders buy!

(The players cheer and react through the following.)

KEMP. Oh! Remind me, dear Shakes, after a draught, to bend your ear with an idea for a play.

SHAKESPEARE. Oh no, I fear I must beg off.

KEMP. Not in the least! You wrote this triumph, lacking though it may be in one noble knight.

SHAKESPEARE. Noble's hardly the word for what you had done! Jigging through the play, speaking to the audience, and running free with your words! No, Kemp. Falstaff died for thy sins, long before I scratched out his name. It could not be helped.

KEMP. But could you not at least show his death?

SHAKESPEARE. Forget not I had! A great hero's death in the battle of Shrewsbury. But like a base coward thou wouldst not stay dead, but rose resurrected, to say thou dissembled.

KEMP. Oh, and was there not a laugh? The best ever heard! Laughed so hard that you begged me to keep it and then penned it in. Did you not pen it in?

SHAKESPEARE. Yes.

KEMP. Then scold not me! Oh how they roared to hear it played! We had them that day, and so they returned for part two! And so we said it would be with Hal Five. Good fights, strong princes, and Falstaff for laughs. And where was the truth in that? No Falstaff today! The audience comes, when they do, to see an actor play a role. Not for the words but for the clowning, jesting, speaking, acting, singing, jigging, fighting best of us. The words in the play are but fine trimmings on our effort.

SHAKESPEARE. Is that so?

KEMP. Aye, by my tongue, so it is!

SHAKESPEARE. Then I must thank you, Kemp, for telling me so. In my folly I thought that some might have come to hear a story, but now I see: they're here for thee, Kemp, and any praise that I receive is a mere fool's fancy.

KEMP. At least now you know. You should be grateful to me, Shakerags, for whom else could make thy Dogberry, Falstaff, and Bottom ring true, but one Cavaliero Kemp - who with wit and jig did send thy words to the heights of Olympus!

SHAKESPEARE. May God grace thee for it, Kemp, for I know I cannot. But what of Mistress Katherine?

KATE. Nay, bring me not in this.

KEMP. Yes, do Shakes, make sense.

SHAKESPEARE. How couldst thou play thy roles without her pins? 'Twas she made Bottom into a perfect ass and padded Falstaff's glutton's belly with special hose. She sewed thy buttons, polished thy bells, and oft did make a motley fool of thee. So tell me, dear Kemp, if you will, how is it a player may thrive without stage, nor words, nor clothes of any kind?

KEMP. If he be skilled enough a man can earn his bread by dance alone. Hence the Nine Days Wonder!

SHAKESPEARE. What wonder is this?

KEMP. To dance a Morris from London to Norwich!

SHAKESPEARE. London to Norwich in nine days? That's madness.

KEMP. Well, they aren't nine days in a row! Or how could I savor my fame in each town on the way?

SHAKESPEARE. A fine fool's idea.

KEMP. No wonder. It's yours.

SHAKESPEARE. Mine?

KEMP. Yes! Do you not recall that you bid me to dance if I wouldn't play as you bade? Well, at first I gnashed my teeth over your suggestion, but then Sinklo called it a fine idea, and I thought here's my final chance to turn your words to my gain. So you see: to play a fool is not to be a fool. Nine Days dancing will bring more than a year in the Chamberlain's Men!

SHAKESPEARE. Then go dance thy Nine Men's Morris, I wish thee the best.

KEMP. Now that's a first - William Shakespeare wishes Will Kemp the best! There's a fine one. I'll best you! I'll best the great lot of you over a good pot of ale! A-ha! To the tavern with all!

(The players cheer. **KEMP** *and the players exit, leaving* **BURBAGE, SHAKESPEARE, RICE,** *and* **KATE**.*)*

BURBAGE. Will you not bury your hatchet?

SHAKESPEARE. I would bury it in him. But by all means, go in good faith. Drink with him a pot of ale, and say what thou wilt of me. I'm sure there's much to say.

BURBAGE. You're sure you won't join us?

SHAKESPEARE. No. I am in pain.

BURBAGE. John?

RICE. By and by, once I'm unmade.

BURBAGE. Indeed, at the tavern it's wise to be less a maid than you now seem. Kate?

KATE. Nay Richard, my only, the banner will not bring itself in. But with my blessing, you may give this to Kemp.

*(***KATE** *kisses* **BURBAGE**.*)*

BURBAGE. I'd rather keep it myself, lest the intent be lost in the conveyance.

KATE. As you please.

BURBAGE. It would please me to please you.

KATE. Aye, 'tis well known – go on, your fellows await.

BURBAGE. So they do. Good night to you all!

*(***BURRBAGE** *exits to the street.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Well Master Rice, you've played your first role.

RICE. I'm sorry if I offended, sir.

SHAKESPEARE. No, John – yours is not the apology I seek. Did you enjoy playing Katherine?

RICE. I enjoyed speaking your words.

SHAKESPEARE. We'll see if you still feel the same once you've said a few more of them. How came you to the playhouse?

RICE. By the river.

SHAKESPEARE. An apprentice wit as well, I see. I meant, how came you to your apprenticeship.

RICE. And as I said, by the river. My father's a boatman, and saw the Globe being built. When the Queen began to conscript against the Irish Rebellion, he said: "If you must serve the crown by playing a soldier, I'd rather it was in the playhouse than the field." Watermen's sons are oft pressed to service.

SHAKESPEARE. You ever pilot a bark?

RICE. Wouldn't be a boatman's boy if I hadn't. Sir, how came you to acting?

SHAKESPEARE. My father's a glover. He sat in the guildhall at Stratford where the traveling players performed till some strife over sympathies encouraged him to sign me to Ned Alleyn's company.

KATE. His father's a catholic.

SHAKESPEARE. Kate!

KATE. Is he not?

SHAKESPEARE. Leave it be.

RICE. And were you there with Will Kemp?

SHAKESPEARE. Long ago. We were once good friends.

KATE. Young master John, take this to heart: No actor of skill, no matter how great, is ever the better to fight with a playwright.

RICE. Why?

KATE. Because playwrights fight dirty. Any thing that you say may be put on the stage to paint a sad mockery of you.

RICE. But you've not done this of Kemp?

KATE. Hasn't he, now? I'm sure some work of betrayal has even this moment been set to the page. Do tell us, Will - what is your next play?

SHAKESPEARE. It's not about Kemp.

KATE. So it's a betrayal, is it?

SHAKESPEARE. Perhaps. Oh, now you'll laugh.

KATE. Come now, the title!

SHAKESPEARE. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar.

KATE. A ha! What did I say – a betrayal! And what a betrayal it is.

SHAKESPEARE. I knew you would laugh.

KATE. Oh Will, how you worry. We all know you're brilliant. See how the hairline withdraws to make room for the brain!

RICE. Master Shakespeare, can all men be so found in their art?

SHAKESPEARE. Art is an echo of the person who made it. But you need an astute ear indeed to locate its source. If a man wished know me, he'd be much better served to buy me a pint.

RICE. And how will they know you a hundred years hence?

SHAKESPEARE. If my work is still known a hundred years hence, I'll buy you that pint.

RICE. Don't think they'll endure?

SHAKESPEARE. Plays are nothing but a product of their times, likely to wane with the fashion of the day. No, Master Rice, if anything it is by the strength of the youth that our art shall survive. So be attentive and studious, and the length of your days shall be the legacy of mine.

RICE. With any luck, I'll be out of this dress before those days end.

SHAKESPEARE. Ha!

KATE. Don't you encourage him.

SHAKESPEARE. No no, of course. You see, Master John, for all my dark sonnets, Kate knows me too well.

KATE. I know Burbage better. They may be your words, but he brings them to life.

SHAKESPEARE. Good thing he does, my wife wouldn't approve.

KATE. Do you think that his does?

SHAKESPEARE. I try not to wonder. Have you ever told him?

KATE. Oh, zounds, Will. What's past is past.

SHAKESPEARE. He's still my best friend.

KATE. And need I remind you that you called it off? There's nothing to tell. He's happy not knowing and I'm glad he doesn't. Telling him now would only spell trouble. You're both married men - with daughters, I might add. I'm sorry –

SHAKESPEARE. Please don't. Will you never wed?

KATE. Be glad that I don't. Then where would you be? You lot can't even pick up your costumes, let alone unlace a corset.

RICE. Speaking of, Mistress Kate –

KATE. Now for that you must wait, Master Rice.

(There is a knock on the exterior door.)

SHAKESPEARE. If that's some well-wisher, I've gone out.

KATE. Yes, yes.

*(***KATE** *opens the door to* **FRANCIS BACON**. *He is an exceedingly well-dressed lawyer and advisor to Queen Elizabeth. He is in his late 30s, with a stately beard and an air of conscious superiority.)*

KATE. Good evening, sir.

BACON. Madam, if Master Shakespeare is within tell him that Francis Bacon would share a word.

KATE. Alas, Master Bacon, Shakespeare has gone for the night.

SHAKESPEARE. Francis Bacon, you say?

KATE. Aye, but 'tis pointless for me to tell him you've gone when you shout his name so!

*(***SHAKESPEARE** *goes to the door, greeting* **BACON**.*)*

SHAKESPEARE. Master Bacon, a pleasure to see you outside the Queen's court.

BACON. Master Shakespeare, do you always tell your servants to turn away gentlemen of breeding?

SHAKESPEARE. No, of course. Thank you, Kate.

*(***KATE** *gives* **SHAKESPEARE** *a look and returns to her chores.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Master Bacon, an honor. I must thank you again for the gift of your essays last winter at Richmond. Such well-formed thoughts, so concisely put.

BACON. Yes.

SHAKESPEARE. And, uh, what brings you to visit the Lord Chamberlain's Men?

BACON. Why, to see the new Globe, of course! 'tis a wonderful building with a good view of the river – although the magic does wear off somewhat backstage.

SHAKESPEARE. Oh. Our apprentice, John Rice. Francis Bacon.

*(***RICE** *curtseys. Then bows. Unsure.)*

RICE. Did you enjoy Henry the Fifth, sir?

BACON. You know, the problem with a new playhouse is that they're always more entertaining than the plays they contain. Oh this one was decent enough. Cleverness, fighting. Burbage was good. Though I couldn't help but notice that Jack Falstaff was missing.

SHAKESPEARE. The problems with Falstaff were out of my hands.

BACON. A shame. May we speak in private?

*(***SHAKESPEARE** *looks at* **KATE**.*)*

KATE. John, go upstairs.

RICE. I would prefer to go to the tavern.

KATE. Young man, I must first sweep the stage, bolt the doors and bring down the banner.

RICE. But -

KATE. – But me no buts. The whole riverside needn't think we're doing a show when we aren't. Your corset shall wait. Upstairs, now.

RICE. Then 'tis on your head if my hem should catch on the step.

KATE. Go. Sirs, by your leave.

*(***RICE** *exits upstairs.* **KATE** *exits onto the stage.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Sir, I am at your service. I hope it nothing serious.

BACON. Quite serious, yes.

SHAKESPEARE. Some legal matter, is it?

BACON. Master Shakespeare, though we barely spoke at Richmond, in plain terms I am a tremendous enthusiast for your work. I've seen most of your plays a couple times each, read and re-read the poems by your hand, and built a good sense of your qualities as an author. The lyricism, the form and phrase of your thoughts, there's a voice in your work not unlike my own. A finesse, if you will.

SHAKESPEARE. Oh. Um. Thank you, sir.

BACON. I have an idea for a play that I think you might like.

SHAKESPEARE. I'm happy to hear it, but I'm only the playwright. Any new play must be submitted to Burbage. He'll pay ten pounds for the script if he likes it enough.

BACON. Ten pounds! How can a play command such a price?

SHAKESPEARE. The Lord Chamberlain's Men have a grant for new work.

BACON. From whom?

SHAKESPEARE. The Lord Chamberlain.

BACON. Well, if you'll allow me, I don't think it's yet ready for Burbage. I wish for a play to commemorate the Queen's Order of the Garter.

SHAKESPEARE. Garnishing favor?

BACON. While Essex fights the Irish, my hands are tied at court. But a play's the means to catch the conscience of the Queen. If it could return me to her counsel, I would gladly commission thee for it.

SHAKESPEARE. Commission me?

BACON. How's thirty pounds?

SHAKESPEARE. Tell me this play. The setting?

BACON. Windsor.

SHAKESPEARE. A pastoral!

BACON. It's more an idyll of country town life.

SHAKESPEARE. It's less idyllic than you'd think. What is the premise?

BACON. An old knight goes a-wooing, and the wives of the town do play several tricks upon him.

SHAKESPEARE. Why? Are they angry?

BACON. No, they're quite merry.

SHAKESPEARE. I see. Tell me more.

BACON. Where was I?

SHAKESPEARE. With these merry wives of Windsor. Is there a title?

BACON. Oh, you'll love this! I call it *Falstaff in Love!*

SHAKESPEARE. That's a… fine name.

BACON. I knew you would like it.

SHAKESPEARE. - except that Falstaff is dead.

BACON. So bring him back. Thirty pounds for thy pains.

SHAKESPEARE. Hardly enough to bring a man back to life.

BACON. Call it forty then.

SHAKESPEARE. Master Bacon –

BACON. Fifty!

SHAKESPEARE. If you're so particular about what it contains, why don't you simply write it?

BACON. Well, as it happens.

*(***BACON** *pulls out a sheaf of handwritten pages. A pause.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Now I'm confused. You want to commission a play that you've already written?

BACON. As the Queen's legal counsel, I shouldn't write a play.

SHAKESPEARE. So strike off your name.

BACON. Burbage might still refuse it.

SHAKESPEARE. Rejection's a risk that all playwrights face.

BACON. But with your name on the page it's assured a production.

SHAKESPEARE. Well, it is my playhouse, after all.

BACON. Besides, there's no merit in an anonymous commission. But William Shakespeare's *Falstaff in Love*, now that's a prize! And already written to suit my needs.

SHAKESPEARE. And what of my needs? Like consistency. I can't just bring Falstaff back. The dear knight is dead, and will not revive. Or should I ignore the whole plot of my *Henry the Fifth?*

(There is a pounding, scratching sound on the outside door.)

BACON. Well I didn't think you'd kill him off when I wrote it.

SHAKESPEARE. Authors sometimes do that.

BACON. Perhaps it could occur before your *Henry the Fourth.*

SHAKESPEARE. Kate, the door! Fine. Let's suppose it does, will Prince Hal join him in Windsor?

BACON. Oh no, Hal can't be there. It celebrates the Queen.

SHAKESPEARE. Now, how can it occur before the two Henry plays and still celebrate our queen? Had Falstaff not died when Hal was crowned, he'd be a mere two hundred and fifty years old!

BACON. Master Shakespeare, I'd hope that you of all men would allow a little imagination in your art.

*(***RICE** *enters, still in his dress.)*

RICE. Shall I get the door?

SHAKESPEARE. Not as you're dressed – go and get Kate.

(Beat. **RICE** *goes to get* **KATE**.*)*

SHAKESPEARE. Let me be clear on this point, Master Bacon, to be art it must be truthful.

BACON. Truthful! There's a laugh! Boys dressed as women dressed as men? Fairy kings and queens? Two sets of long-lost twins from different places with the same improbable names? Are these the trappings of truth?

SHAKESPEARE. There is a truth to them. Truth in art is different than truth in life.

BACON. Oh, you think I don't know this? I practiced your craft with Kit Marlowe when we were both at Grey's Inn.

SHAKESPEARE. And see where that got him.

BACON. Christopher Marlowe would have done well to keep his mouth shut and do what was asked of him.

SHAKESPEARE. What does that mean?

BACON. Only that I suggest thou learn from his mistakes, and show a healthy respect for thy superiors, Master Shakespeare. Truth in politics is different than truth in life – I hope thy plays are not more conscious of that fact than thee.

SHAKESPEARE. And what if you should later claim it as your own? Might not all of my plays then suffer confusion, till none knew whether 'twas Shakespeare or Bacon who wrote them?

BACON. Anyone might make such a claim! Imagine if the Earl of Oxford said the same.

SHAKESPEARE. Edward De Vere is not a Star Chamber lawyer who serves the Queen's court. I think there's no question whose word bears more weight, yours or mine.

*(***KATE** *and* **RICE** *return.)*

KATE. …so the banner must wait, must it? No mistake, Master John, when men talk business they don't lift a finger.

*(***KATE** *opens the door, revealing* **SINKLO**. *He looks more unwell than usual.)*

KATE. Aye, Master Sinklo – what brings you back?

*(***SINKLO** *starts to speak but collapses instead. And twitches.)*

KATE. Now, is that any way to behave?

SHAKESPEARE. What, drunk already?

RICE. He's bleeding.

SHAKESPEARE. Well, get him up... Master Bacon, forgive him. After an opening performance some celebration is normal. Today much sooner than usual.

BACON. Are all your players so debauched?

SHAKESPEARE. No, just most of them. I thought they were going to the Mermaid.

KATE. I'd say he found the bearpit, by the look of him. Master Sinckler, arise. John, don't soil that dress.

SHAKESPEARE. Kate, lead him out. He looks unwell.

BACON. I really should go.

SHAKESPEARE. Stay but a moment.

RICE. Wait, he's not –

*(***KATE** *tries to help* **SINKLO** *up, but when she touches him he enters some sort of fervor.* **SINKLO** *bites* **KATE** *on the arm. Hard.)*

KATE. AAHHHH!

SHAKESPEARE. Kate!

KATE. GOOD GOD!!! Get him off! I say get him off!

RICE. Stop him! Oh murder!

SHAKESPEARE. Good Christ almighty! Sinklo, let go!

*(***BACON** *draws his sword.)*

BACON. Desist I say, in the name of the Queen!

*(***RICE** *clubs* **SINKLO** *with a theatrical prop.* **SINKLO** *releases his bite and snarls at* **RICE**.*)*

BACON. Stand down!

RICE. Help her, she's hurt!

SHAKESPEARE. John!

BACON. Stand down, I say!

*(***SINKLO** *charges* **RICE**. **BACON** *knocks* **RICE** *aside and stabs* **SINKLO**, *who dies on the sword and falls to the ground.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Are you bleeding?

KATE. Don't touch me!

SHAKESPEARE. John, go and get water! Go.

*(***RICE** *goes out.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Does he live?

BACON. There's no breath in him.

SHAKESPEARE. What possessed him to do this?

KATE. I can't feel my fingers.

SHAKESPEARE. It's simply the pain. They'll come back in good time. Don't tense your arm. Can you cut a bandage?

*(***BACON** *picks up a piece of clothing.)*

KATE. Not the good robe! Use the chemise.

*(***BACON** *picks up different piece of clothing. He tears out a strip.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Sit quiet now, Kate.

BACON. That wound is severe.

SHAKESPEARE. It will at least be well-bound. Hold this a moment, it has to be taut.

BACON. In truth, I can't stay.

SHAKESPEARE. No, but you must! They'll close down the Globe unless you tell them what happened!

BACON. Oh I'm sure this sort of thing occurs all the time in Southwark. He wasn't a company member, was he?

SHAKESPEARE. No. Just a hired man.

BACON. Good, then pay the family his stipend and call it concluded.

*(***RICE** *re-enters.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Where's the water?

RICE. The riverfront's swarmed. People in droves are crossing the Thames, some are wounded, all are wet, and a great many soldiers stand at the ready. Downriver is thick with debris. The barks cannot pass. Word is the plague.

BACON. Ah yes, enjoy your new playhouse! And I hope you don't mind if as Queen's Counsel, I offer this bit of pro bono advice: Don't mention my name.

SHAKESPEARE. But you've killed an actor!

BACON. And think of how poorly that would reflect upon me. Besides, you can explain better than I, Master Shakespeare. You have a way with words.

*(***BURBAGE** *arrives from outside.)*

BURBAGE. Will, thank God you're here! The streets are pure madness! The bridge has collapsed.

BACON. Collapsed?

SHAKESPEARE. That will bring a drop in attendance.

BURBAGE. Did Sinklo come back here? He fell back in the press approaching the river.

SHAKESPEARE. There he is. And much gaunter than usual.

BURBAGE. What in God's name?

SHAKESPEARE. He was wounded when he arrived and collapsed at the threshold. Master Bacon, of course, hath witnessed all.

RICE. Master Shakespeare –

BURBAGE. Yes, Master Bacon, of course. Will, is he...?

BACON. He is dead, Master Burbage.

BURBAGE. No.

KATE. Richard – ah!

BURBAGE. Kate, are you well?

RICE. She was hurt in the fight.

KATE. A scratch, nothing more.

BURBAGE. What fight?

SHAKESPEARE. Some ruffians came in from the street, but Master Bacon fended them off. We owe him our lives.

BACON. Yes, though I'm afraid I can't stay.

BURBAGE. But you must be our witness.

BACON. That depends on some factors, does it not, Master Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE. It will earn you my thanks, and all that it means.

BACON. Then I'll do what I can.

BURBAGE. Many thanks, sir. I'm grateful to you that our dear Kate is safe. Are you in pain?

KATE. I am oddly cold. But give it some time, it hurts less already.

BURBAGE. I'm just glad you're safe.

(They kiss. **KEMP** *and the other players return.)*

KEMP. ...so it seems we must locate a more local tavern. - Oh, Burbage you devil! - What's happened to Sinklo?

SHAKESPEARE. A touch of misfortune has left him quite dead.

KEMP. Well, that's some ill news. I leave the players and all hell breaks loose.

BURBAGE. Kemp. Leave it be.

KEMP. You're one to talk! Your Southwark playhouse has cost him his life, and what do you do? Go tend to your minx, he wasn't your friend.

BURBAGE. Alright Kemp. Ha ha. You have me.

KATE. *(in sudden pain)* Master Kemp, do you call me a whore?

BURBAGE. Please, Kate, it's only a jest.

KATE. A serious one; and what do you do? I toil each day to wash your bright colors and mend up your hose, and what thanks? Two calloused hands and these dim-growing eyes. No applause for your Kate – just a tuppence a day and these disgusting right dogs of the stage, always barking "Kate! Kate! Kate!"

RICE. I don't bark at you.

KATE. Oh no, Master Rice. You're new to the role, but I'm sure you'll prove a quick study.

BURBAGE. What causes this?

SHAKESPEARE. Aye, peace, Katherine – you are wounded.

KATE. Oh, not so wounded in my body as my pride, but what's pride to you? You'd support any monarch who gives you a coin, but I know the truth. What would your family say? That you celebrate Essex with this play of yours, for quelling the Irish at the edge of his sword all so good Queen Bess can slaughter her Catholics. I would she would join them, the merciless bitch.

BURBAGE. Kate, please. Francis Bacon is the Queen's counsel.

KATE. I don't give a fart what he is to our heretic Queen. I pray the Spanish arrive like the Romans to conquer this barbarous England and return us to the faith of our fathers.

KEMP. Be still your tongue.

SHAKESPEARE. She knows not what she says –

KATE. Do I not? At the chapel in Stratford did you not say "Behind this white wall is painted good Saint George, awaiting true England like the Avalon King"?

SHAKESPEARE. I'll have no part in this treason.

KATE. My head, how it swims!

BURBAGE. Kate.

KATE. Enough, leave me be!

*(***KATE** *runs upstairs with growing difficulty.)*

SHAKESPEARE. Please, Master Bacon, I must ask you to pay her no heed.

BACON. Is this true? Are you a Catholic?

SHAKESPEARE. You know I am not.

BACON. When I speak to the courts, I will strive to be reasoned.

BURBAGE. You won't report her?

BACON. I am a crown lawyer, Master Burbage. That may not mean much to you, but it does to me. Between rebellion in Ireland and the Spanish Armada, I am obliged to report any Catholic threat, no matter how small. Now if you'll excuse me, I must cross the Thames.

BURBAGE. Oh, could this day be any worse?

*(***BACON** *goes to open the door, but he barely reaches the handle when it flies open and the room floods with* **AFFLICTED** *– frenzied men and women, covered in blood, who move with extreme difficulty. They attack with a clawing, biting aggression.)*

(All fight. It should be realistic and horrifying, with lots of screaming, shouting, and confusion. Ad-libbing is encouraged, provided it doesn't drown out any subsequent dialogue.)

BACON. Ahh!

BURBAGE. What are they?

KEMP. The devil, I say!? Get back!

RICE. They've gone mad like Sinklo!

BURBAGE. Ah! Off! Be off! A sword!

KEMP. Help! They're upon me!

SHAKESPEARE. Kemp, away with those bells! Have we no real weapons?