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The Last Will

Robert Brustein

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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ISBN 978-0-573-70223-5

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THE LAST WILL was first produced in Boston by the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company (Artistic Director Steve Maler) and Suffolk University (Artistic Director Marilyn Plotkins) at the Modern Theatre in February 1013. The Boston performance was directed by Steven Maler. The Boston sets were by Eric Levenson, the costumes by Nancy Leary, the lighting by Eric Southern. The Production Manager was Jo Williams and the Stage Manager was Melissa Daroff.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Allyn Burrows
ANNE HATHAWAY SHAKESPEARE Brooke Adams
RICHARD BURBAGE Jeremiah Kissell
JUDITH SHAKESPEARE Stacy Fischer
SUSANNA HALL Merritt Jansen
FRANCIS COLLINS Billy Meleady

Soon after, it was produced in New York by the Abingdon Theatre (Artistic Director Jan Buttram and Assistant Artistic Director Kim T. Sharp) in April 1013. It was later chosen as two of the entries in China's Wuzhen Festival in May of 2013. The New York production was directed by Austin Pendleton, whose China production was touched up by Jan Buttram. The New York production had sets by Stephen Dobay, costumes by Laura Crow, Lighting by Travis McHale, and Sound Design by David Margolin Lawson. The production Manager was John Trevellini, and the Production Stage Manager was Mark Hoffner. The New York Cast was as follows:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Austin Pendleton
ANNE HATHAWAY SHAKESPEARE Stephanie Roth Haberle
RICHARD BURBAGE Jeremiah Kissell
JUDITH SHAKESPEARE Christianna Nelson
SUSANNA HALL Merritt Jansen
FRANCIS COLLINS David Wohl

CHARACTERS

At the beginning of the play, the characters are the following ages:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE – 48

ANNE HATHAWAY – 56

SUSANNA SHAKESPEARE (HALL) – 30

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE – 27

FRANCIS COLLINS, LAWYER – 47

RICHARD BURBAGE – 45

SETTING & TIME

The play takes place in the four years between William Shakespeare's return to Stratford in 1612 and his death in 1616 but, since the action is not so much historical as subjective, those four years could take place in four days.

1. Grief fills the room up with my absent child

(As the lights come up slowly, the shape of a man in grey, ill-fitting clothes can be perceived standing in the doorway of a bedroom. His face is pinched and his hands are seriously gnarled. He is slightly bent. ANNE HATHAWAY is in the bed, sleeping fitfully. By slow degrees the darkness lifts, and ANNE moves uncomfortably under the covers, half aware of this presence.)

WILL. Grief fills the room up with my absent child.

(ANNE with a start sits up rigidly.)

ANNE. Is that you Will? *(long silence while they contemplate each other)* You were not to have been in Stratford until Advent Sunday. Come into the light.

(WILL is moving into the room, blinking hard.)

ANNE. Why do you lurk in shadow?

WILL. I was watching you sleep. So restless.

ANNE. And you didn't waken me?

WILL. I feared to show my face.

ANNE. Good heavens, why?

WILL. It is a cheerless face.

ANNE. *(peering at him)* You are a lot paler than on your last visit. And your hands. How did they get so gnarled? Are you crippled?

WILL. *(evasive)* It is nothing. The condition will pass.

ANNE. Beware! There is a nasty pestilence in the neighborhood.

WILL. It is even worse in London.

ANNE. It has touched both your brothers.

WILL. Have you seen them?

ANNE. Once, last week. I spoke to Gilbert through the window of his house.

WILL. I spent last evening with him. Face to face.

ANNE. That was madness. God grant that you were not touched.

WILL. I have survived worse plagues. My death will rise not from a pit of pestilence but from a swamp of sores.

ANNE. What does that mean?

WILL. (*ignoring the question*) You said you feared I might grow sick. I am sick. Sick of my life. Its shocks, surprises. Sick of seeing people I love die young.

(*an awkward silence*)

I have walked a long distance.

ANNE. You didn't ride?

WILL. Part of the way. I felt a need to walk. Barefoot. On sharp stones. I should have crawled. I have come (*pause*) to beg my family's forgiveness for my contemptible behavior as a husband and father.

(*ANNE is silent.*)

I have not made you happy.

ANNE. Not often, no.

WILL. I visited you but four weeks a year.

ANNE. And spent your Stratford intervals drinking in the tavern. (*pause*) And ran away to London before the funeral of your only son?

WILL. I saw him in his coffin. That was enough.

ANNE. But to abandon the family just before his burial.

WILL. My Richard was about to open. I was acting in two other plays.

ANNE. You were so invested in your characters that you couldn't say goodbye to your own flesh and blood?

WILL. I said goodbye to Hamnet in my heart, and immortalized his name in a play. Why stay to watch that sad little body being lowered into the indifferent ground.

ANNE. In order to be with your wife and daughters.

WILL. So what you are thinking under that forbearing smile is that my success in the playhouse is nothing to my failure as a husband and a father.

ANNE. I would not have put it that strongly.

WILL. Any other wife would have bashed in my skull with a rusty frying pan.

ANNE. Self-pity is not a manly feature.

WILL. It is an ever present lodger. More at hand than I have ever been to you.

ANNE. You somehow managed to show up for the ceremonial events, like Susanna's marriage.

WILL. Yes, but not, as you say, for the passing of my only son – my impish boy, whose soft moist lips I never kissed goodbye. My sweet young prince, good night. You have entered the silence of your Danish namesake.

ANNE. And how many men have been fortunate enough to install their dead child in the hallowed lists of art.

WILL. You are mocking me, dear Gertrude.

ANNE. My name is Anne.

WILL. I meant to say Anne. My mind misleads from time to time.

ANNE. It is a common failing among those who live by fictions.

WILL. You do mock me, indeed.

ANNE. A little.

WILL. If it is any comfort, I have determined never again to leave your side.

ANNE. And your profession?

WILL. It is over.

ANNE. How can it be over?

WILL. It is over. Do not ask the reasons.

ANNE. And how will we survive?

WILL. I have been acquiring considerable holdings, both here and in the city.

ANNE. So the truant child returns to his home, not as a poor player but as a wealthy landowner?

WILL. Reasonably wealthy. Until a moment ago, I still had a seventh share in the Globe.

(RICHARD BURBAGE enters at this moment, and WILL turns to speak with him. WILL for a moment is in another world.)

BURBAGE. Down to the last rail and floorboard. A stunning catastrophe!

WILL. The entire theatre burned to the ground?

BURBAGE. Predicted by you!

WILL. By me?

BURBAGE. In a characteristic moment of gloom. *(performing)*
“The great Globe itself, and all which it inherit, shall dissolve, yea like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind.” Very prophetic as things turned out.

WILL. Prospero’s great Globe was not only a player’s platform, it was also a celestial planet. I was hardly writing about the loss of a playhouse, I was predicting the end of the world.

BURBAGE. That fire ended our world.

(BURBAGE disappears and WILL turns to ANNE again.)

ANNE. You will return to London when your interests, or your appetites, lure you there.

WILL. Believe what you will, my move to Stratford is permanent.

ANNE. Does that mean you intend to resume your marital obligations? Or shall we say, begin them?

WILL. Always the bitter tongue.

ANNE. It is the only tongue God gave me.

WILL. One last question.

ANNE. Yes?

WILL. Over these twenty-four long years of separation, when I was largely an absent imprint on your bed, can you swear, dear Gertrude, that you have always faithfully observed your marriage vows?

ANNE. My name is Anne.

(blackout)

2. And leave not a rack behind

(ANNE disappears and BURBAGE reappears with WILL in a room in his house, handing him a severely burned shepherd's staff.)

BURBAGE. As actor-manager of the Globe, I brought this souveneur to you. Adam's prop from *As You Like It*.

WILL. But Burbage, how could such sturdy scaffolding be so quickly reduced to cinder and rubble?

BURBAGE. Special effects, man. We were doing *Henry VIII*. The King's first entrance was celebrated by a cannon. The spark touched a thatched roof. The roof sparked the stage. And in less than the length of a brief soliloquy the entire space was a pile of ash and flame.

WILL. And no one was injured?

BURBAGE. Miraculously, not even a groundling, though that buffoon Robert Armin, turned his buttocks towards the blaze as if to extinguish it with noxious gasses. His efforts were rewarded with a huge blister on his arse.

WILL. To risk life and limb for such a barren jape! Was he badly hurt?

BURBAGE. Someone had the wit to douse his flaming breeches with a tankard of ale. But aside from our clown, not a soul among the three thousand spectators suffered serious burns – excepting, of course, the Globe investors, badly scorched by the combustion of their shareholds.

WILL. Myself among them. One clumsy piece of stage business and a major portion of my capital goes up in flames. And on the eve of my (*pause*) retirement.

BURBAGE. You! What about me? My father created that theatre. I was the major shareholder. No need to fear. There's no reason for panic. The company will continue to stage indoor plays at Blackfriars until the

Globe is rebuilt next year. Wait, did you say retirement? We intend to reopen the theatre with a brand new work from you.

WILL. You know I have no intention of writing any more plays.

BURBAGE. I have expressly come to persuade you otherwise. And to tempt you with the news that your fellow players are eager to collect all your dramatic writings into a single folio. Eighteen of your thirty-six plays have never before seen the inside of a printing press.

WILL. Tell the boys to save themselves the paper. Plays are meant to be seen and heard, not read. Only pirates benefit from publication.

BURBAGE. That is precisely the reason for an authorized version – to put an end to all these surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by counterfeit impostors.

WILL. Who cares?

BURBAGE. Ben Jonson is preparing a Folio of his Works.

WILL. Yes, he thinks by calling them “Works,” people won’t realize that they are only plays.

BURBAGE. You showed no such qualms when your poems were set in print.

WILL. Poetry is literature. Theatre is the poor stepsister of the arts.

BURBAGE. Now what explains this sudden disdain for the stage after composing the most popular attractions in the language for over two decades?

WILL. (*evasive*) I’ve lost the will to write.

BURBAGE. No more energy, eh?

WILL. Not a whit.

BURBAGE. Not even for a sonnet?

WILL. Sonnets are like compressed plays. They demand a similar expense of energy.

BURBAGE. Have you run out of ideas? Has the ghost of Christopher Marlowe ceased to whisper in your ear?

WILL. And you, too, spread that idle rumor?

BURBAGE. You must admit your last few plots did seem a little farfetched. (*quoting*) “Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting on an eagle.” Hum! And what about this peculiar stage direction: “*Exit pursued by a bear.*” Eagles? Bears? Where are we? In a theatre, or at the Circus Maximus?

WILL. I was experimenting in new forms.

BURBAGE. New forms! Aha! That suggests fresh inspiration. So why such haste to retire? What’s the issue? You know you can trust my silence.

WILL. Can I?

BURBAGE. Implicitly.

WILL. All right, though you are hardly famous for your prudence...

BURBAGE. Will!!

WILL. You must swear never to reveal my condition to a living soul, especially my wife.

BURBAGE. I swear. What condition?

WILL. My thoughts have ceased to be consecutive and my eyesight is fading.

BURBAGE. Sheer fatigue. You have been writing too much.

WILL. Is that why I have of late been pulling fistfuls of hair from my scalp? Or why I can no longer grasp a quill in my hand? Look at my fingers – the gnarled claws of a misshapen crab.

BURBAGE. You didn’t need a full head of hair to dispatch King Henry to the fields of Agincourt. Or delicate hands to send Orlando to the mat with Charles. Your penmanship was never more than scribbles, anyway. I don’t think I ever saw you write your name the same way twice.

WILL. I am never the same man twice.

BURBAGE. But your signature?

WILL. I can barely scratch it out at all now.

BURBAGE. Then dictate your dialogue to an amanuensis.
Your verse has always flowed as smoothly as the river
Avon.

WILL. That river now is blocked – with decay, debris, and
rotten refuse.

BURBAGE. I am very sorry to hear you say that.

WILL. I am the sorry one – a poet whose mind is too
muddled to invent coherent iambics. I have grey hairs
growing on my brain.

BURBAGE. All right, let's assume you don't write for a spell.
How will you pay your rates? Ah, don't you own a
parcel of tithes in Stratford?

WILL. Well, half a leasehold interest.

BURBAGE. Then you can support yourself for a term as a
provincial landlord, charging extortionate rackrent on
your real estate holdings.

WILL. I have too long neglected my family in order to act
and write for you at the Globe. I intend to once again
assume the responsibilities of a father and a husband.

BURBAGE. And a moneylender.

WILL. (*defiantly*) Yes, and a moneylender.

BURBAGE. Atonement, eh? I guessed you were thinking on
your death.

WILL. It crosses my mind from time to time.

BURBAGE. There is talk that your brother, Gilbert, is sinking
fast. And that your younger brother Richard is here in
a Stratford infirmary suffering from the same disease.

WILL. Yes.

BURBAGE. And your baby brother, Edmund, died of the
pestilence in his late twenties. Curious. How explain
the way that Shakespeare men attract the black plague.
God forbid it should come courting after you.

WILL. I still feel Edmund's loss most keenly.

BURBAGE. I always liked that laddie best. Your brother wasn't much of an actor. He had none of your skills as a writer. But his delicate nature was a rare thing among the King's Men – which may explain why he preferred the company of the King's boys.

WILL. Edmund's sexual preferences were entirely his own business.

BURBAGE. You hardly kept your passion for the Earl of Southampton secret in your sonnets.

WILL. Like most actors, you find it hard to distinguish reality from fiction.

BURBAGE. Like most writers, you find it hard to separate fiction from autobiography.

WILL. Dick, that's a lot of rubbish. Why do actors always think they know more than the playwright about his plays? (*makes as if to leave*)

BURBAGE. (*stopping him*) Calm down, Will, calm down. I've never known you so quick to take offense. Where is the merry reveler of yesteryear?

WILL. Lately, I seem to have lost all my mirth. My spirits hang as heavy as the testicles on an old horse.

BURBAGE. So that explains your return to Stratford, eh? Where every third thought shall be your grave?

WILL. I don't have three consecutive thoughts. I am sick, nursing slow poison in my veins.

BURBAGE. Not from the pestilence!!

WILL. No, from Emilia Lanier.

BURBAGE. That affair ended years ago. What has your dark lady left you other than regrets?

WILL. A lethal legacy whose progress is plodding but persistent.

BURBAGE. After twenty years?

WILL. Twenty years is the life of the disease. The canker likes to make its final passage through the brain.

BURBAGE. (*taken aback*) You'll soon recover your faculties.

WILL. You think so? Already my mind is affected.

BURBAGE. How so?

WILL. I who was known for mercy and forgiveness have now turned sour and suspicious. But, much much worse for a writer, I am finding it harder to tell fiction from fact.

BURBAGE. And the cause?

WILL. Either the pox my mistress gave me or the mercury my doctors dosed me with to kill it.

BURBAGE. My poor old friend, you have been suffering.

WILL. Please tell no one. I am hoping rest will cure this affliction.

BURBAGE. Well, talk won't cure it. Let's drown it out! I'm told you have a particularly agreeable tavern in the outskirts.

WILL. You mean The Cage?

BURBAGE. The Cage. A well-named playpen for a thirsty animal.

WILL. The lodgings there are good as well.

BURBAGE. Then the Cage is where I'll lay my head this night.

WILL. And I will pay a call on brother Gilbert – perhaps my last before he dies.

BURBAGE. And here's another vow I'll make. Until you decide to return to London, each year at Whitsuntide I'll reenter the bars of the Cage to join you for a bibulous reunion.

WILL. (*somewhat dazed*) Agreed.

BURBAGE. Is the establishment worth our custom?

WILL. It's not the Boar's Head or the Mermaid, but the Madeira is imported directly from the sugar fields of Portugal.

BURBAGE. Madeira wine it is then, man. After one or two bottles of that divine ambrosia, I warrant, you'll have your head down the bodice of some busty barmaid, warbling "Where the bee sucks there suck I."

WILL. Provided I have the breath to sing the song or the memory to recall the lyric.

BURBAGE. Or the hunger to suck the bosom.

(WILL walks unsteadily ahead and collapses. BURBAGE goes to his aid.)

Will! Will! Are you all right?

(WILL comes slowly to his senses. BURBAGE helps him up.)

3. Incestuous sheets

(We are back in ANNE's bedroom)

WILL. Gertrude, wake up! Is it true?

ANNE. Stop this Gertrude nonsense! I am your wife, not your Hamlet's mother.

WILL. Is it true?

ANNE. Is what true?

WILL. Who is here with you? There! Hiding in your closet!

ANNE. Who would be there?

WILL. The adulterous brother. Dead for a ducat.

ANNE. Will, you're frightening me. Where have you come from?

WILL. From my brother Gilbert's bedside. He will not live another week.

ANNE. Is he suffering?

WILL. Horribly. Fearful gripes in his bowels. Spastic aches in his joints.

ANNE. I am told he was moved to the infirmary at St. Anne's.

WILL. You mean the charnel house at St. Anne's. That is where I found his carcass, half-alive amidst a dozen decomposing corpses.

ANNE. I grieve to hear you say it.

WILL. I do not doubt you grieve to hear me say it. I came home to ask for your forgiveness. Now you must ask for mine.

ANNE. What does that mean?

(WILL is silent.)

WILL. I say I visited my brother.

ANNE. You should not have exposed yourself to the hazards of the black death.

WILL. What I cannot endure is blacker death that's called betrayal. But one month gone.

ANNE. You talk in riddles.

WILL. (*ignoring the question*) When did you visit Gilbert last?

ANNE. Before he was taken to St. Anne's. I feared contamination.

WILL. Your contamination was the subject of my visit.

ANNE. He mentioned me?

WILL. In a manner of speaking. He wished to make confession.

ANNE. What kind of confession?

WILL. A confession that he always loved you, that his love for you was hairy with lust.

ANNE. He would not say so.

WILL. No, he did not say so. He could not speak. His mouth was swollen with pustules. But his eyes...his every gasp confirmed his passion for you. Is it true?

ANNE. (*firmly*) No.

WILL. He never consummated the act of darkness with you?

ANNE. Never!

WILL. (*passionately*) Then why was he clutching your handkerchief?

ANNE. Which handkerchief?

WILL. This one! (*removing a fraying handkerchief from his tunic, which bears the initials AS*) He spewed his bloody rheum on it.

ANNE. (*ANNE recoils from the handkerchief.*) If that thing is mine, he never got it from me.

WILL. Of course it's yours – the gift I gave you at our nuptials.

ANNE. I haven't seen that thing in years.

WILL. Then how did it come into my brother's hand?

ANNE. That you must tell me.

WILL. It was Gilbert I left to care for you, when first I went to tour the provinces.

ANNE. You left me with a boy twelve years my junior.

WILL. And I was a boy eight years your junior. Which did not prevent you from luring me into that rye field...

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