

SHAKESPEARE IN SHAMBLES

A ONE ACT COMEDY

By Wade Bradford

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SYNOPSIS: William Shakespeare has a lot to deal with: ticket sales, disgruntled actors, an insanely jealous wife, and a Lord Chamberlain that wants to close down his immoral theater. On top of it all, everyone is anxious to find out what he will write next. Too bad the Immortal Bard is a fraud – he hasn't written a single play! So who is the author? Why, none other than Queen Elizabeth! But keeping their secret hidden is going to take a lot of work...and a lot of costume changes.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 MEN, 3 WOMEN)

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (m)..... The Bard of Stratford-on-Avon; in reality just a shrewd businessman.
(95 lines)

THOMAS KEMP (m)..... An aging, oafish actor. (59 lines)

GERTY (f)..... A boisterous “costume wench.”
(20 lines)

QUEEN ELIZABETH (f)..... Sovereign of the English Throne; posing as “Squire X.” (44 lines)

THE WIFE (f)..... Shakespeare’s jealous wife, Anne Hathaway. (24 lines)

LORD CHAMBERLAIN (m)..... Pompous officer of the crown.
(11 lines)

AT RISE:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE sits at his desk in the cramped offices of the Globe Theater. There are props and costumes hanging about. At first, it may appear that Shakespeare is writing, but as he begins counting some of the gold coins sitting next to him, it becomes obvious that he is calculating the box office receipts.

KEMP, a rather oafish older actor, knocks on the door.

SHAKESPEARE: At last. You may enter. (*Expecting someone else.*)

Oh, Kemp. It's you.

KEMP: Master Shakespeare, sir, it pains me to bother you—

SHAKESPEARE: Not at all, Kemp. I can always spare a moment for my friends. Especially one such as good old Kemp, the clown of the London stage. In fact, I could use some cheering up. Do something funny.

KEMP: Right now?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, this instant. Make me laugh.

KEMP: Hmm. Something funny. Must think. Must think. (*He groans, and even though he isn't trying to be funny, it looks funny.*) Must think!

SHAKESPEARE: Ha, ha! You're hysterical.

KEMP: Wait – I'm still thinking.

SHAKESPEARE: Never mind; what can I do for you?

KEMP: Oh, now I forgot! That's what comes of thinking too hard.

SHAKESPEARE: Well, perhaps you'll remember another time. Until then, know that you are always welcome in the counting room of the Globe Theater, so long as you keep your hands visible at all times.

KEMP: Working on another play?

SHAKESPEARE: Aren't I always?

KEMP: Is it another tragedy?

SHAKESPEARE: We won't know until the ticket sales. Now, if you'll excuse me—

KEMP: I don't know how you do it, sir. Running a theater, acting in your own plays, keeping the books, spouting colorful commentary during the bear-baiting events. Why, I'm amazed that you can find the time to write.

SHAKESPEARE: What are you implying? That I don't write my own plays? That William Shakespeare is a sham, a fraud, a plagiarist?

KEMP: No, I—

SHAKESPEARE: Where have you heard these jealous and hateful rumors? With whom have you been talking? Christopher Marlowe? Francis Bacon? Was it the Earl of Oxford? That insolent fop!

KEMP: Sir, no.

SHAKESPEARE: I am William Shakespeare, am I not?

KEMP: Yes, sir.

SHAKESPEARE: And do I not constantly and consistently write brilliant plays?

KEMP: No doubt about it, sir. Say, what's the title of the next one?

SHAKESPEARE: I don't know, it hasn't been delivered – I mean, the name of the play has not yet been born from my fertile imagination. Now, good Kemp, if you have no other business—

KEMP: Ah, now I remember the reason for my bothersome ways; it concerns the current production.

SHAKESPEARE: Yes?

KEMP: I was wondering if you needed me as an actor.

SHAKESPEARE: In *Romeo and Juliet*? My dear Kemp, we have already cast that particular play.

KEMP: You didn't hear?

SHAKESPEARE: Hear what?

KEMP: About your actors.

SHAKESPEARE: Pray, tell me.

KEMP: One of them got a bit carried away.

SHAKESPEARE: What do you mean?

KEMP: He died of the plague, and they carried him away.

SHAKESPEARE: 'Zounds!

KEMP: So I was hoping I could take his place.

SHAKESPEARE: In the grave?

KEMP: On the stage.

SHAKESPEARE: Which one died?

KEMP: Drake.

SHAKESPEARE: Drake is dead? He was to play our Juliet! The man with the most girlish voice in all of London is dead! What are we to do?! (*Pounds his fist.*) This is horrendous! Horrendous!

KEMP: Now, sir, just because Juliet is dead, that's no reason to become suicidal.

SHAKESPEARE: But without Drake, we have no tragedy. No ticket sales!

KEMP: I could do it, sir.

SHAKESPEARE: Do what?

KEMP: I could play Juliet.

SHAKESPEARE: (*Looks him up and down.*) You? Kemp? You wish me to cast you as the beautiful, young Juliet Montague, the star-crossed girl of fourteen years?

KEMP: I think I could pull it off.

SHAKESPEARE: Oh, Kemp—

KEMP: I would like to play a more serious role.

SHAKESPEARE: Ha!

KEMP: No, sir, I mean it. I want to be a real actor. A tragedian. I've grown weary of standing on stage like a clown and having people laugh at me. I don't want to be laughed at anymore.

SHAKESPEARE: Then, by all means, my friend, go put on a dress.

KEMP: Thank you, sir, you won't regret this!

SHAKESPEARE: Wait, wait, Kemp! (*Pauses.*) How can I say this gently? I don't think that the balcony scene...can support your weight.

KEMP: I could buttress the balcony.

SHAKESPEARE: And Juliet's bosom—

KEMP: I could buttress me bosom.

SHAKESPEARE: But I am afraid there is no way you could fit into the costume.

KEMP: (*Walking toward the exit.*) I have already thought of that and took the liberty of enlisting the help of Gerty, the costume wench!

KEMP motions out the door and draws in GERTY the costume wench, a rather crass and crude yet very boisterous and life-loving woman. She might have an eye patch, and she is certainly missing some teeth.

GERTY: Hello, loves!

SHAKESPEARE: (*Not pleased to see her.*) Salutations, Madam Gertrude.

GERTY: Oh, no need to be formal, love; to be formal there's no need. We're so very well-acquainted, you and I.

KEMP: I was telling Mr. Shakespeare that you wouldn't object to making a bit of alterations.

GERTY: Oh, no, I wouldn't mind a bit of alterations, a bit of alterations I wouldn't mind, for the good of the show and all. Why, Willy and I are quite close, and I would do anything for him just as he would do anything for me. Isn't that right, my lovely little Willy?

SHAKESPEARE: Madam, I can assure you, our relationship is one of pure business.

GERTY: No need to be coy in front of Kempy. Have you forgotten how you passionately embraced me whilst I was unawares?

SHAKESPEARE: (*Explaining to KEMP.*) It was in the costume room. It was dark. Macbeth rehearsals were in progress. I was searching for the wrinkly old witch costume.

GERTY: And he grabbed onto me!

SHAKESPEARE: You can understand my mistake.

GERTY: It was love at first fondle.

SHAKESPEARE: Madam, I can assure you, it was not.

GERTY: Then why did you carry me off, then? Thought I was a costume?

SHAKESPEARE: No, our costumes aren't so bulky as your personage. After grabbing hold of you, I mistook you for a bag of laundry that was in the early stages of mildew. And I have already emphatically apologized for the ill-gotten grope, and I shall remind you that there is no romance between us.

GERTY: This one's shy, he is; doesn't care for public displays of affection.

SHAKESPEARE: And I shall also remind you that I am happily married.

KEMP: Happily? Why sir, your wife gave you a bloody lip!

SHAKESPEARE: A sandbag fell from the rafters.

GERTY: And your wife was the one that cut the rope.

SHAKESPEARE: The woman is a very loving wife who happens to be insanely jealous. And to make matters worse, she has this paranoid delusion that I have been writing love sonnets to a mysterious woman.

KEMP: Well, have you?

SHAKESPEARE: No!

KEMP: Oh, so it's a mysterious man.

SHAKESPEARE: No! They are simply poems to no one in particular.

GERTY: I hope you haven't told her about our romance.

SHAKESPEARE: Of course I haven't.

GERTY: Good, let's keep it a secret.

SHAKESPEARE: There is no secret! 'Zounds! Dear Gertrude, why don't you go to the retiring house and see if you can squeeze Kemp into a corset?

GERTY: (*Pulling KEMP along.*) I'll squeeze him like a tick, I will.

KEMP: I look good in purple.

SHAKESPEARE: No purple. And take this gown. Adorn it with something regal, it's still not yet fit for a queen.

GERTY: Everything you want and more, love.

KEMP and GERTY exit.

SHAKESPEARE: Finally, I am rid of that pair of gruesomely—

KEMP re-enters.

SHAKESPEARE: —wonderful people, hello again.

KEMP: I nearly forgot, sir. The players were hoping you could give us a few bits of your poetic brilliance.

SHAKESPEARE: My brilliance?

KEMP: To place on Drake's tombstone.

SHAKESPEARE: You want me to write something now?

KEMP: If it's not too much trouble. I would expect it would take a genius like yourself only a second.

SHAKESPEARE: Well... What... What should I say?

KEMP: Oh, anything would do, sir. Just a few words that exquisitely summarize the human condition in all its fragile majesty.

SHAKESPEARE: Oh. Hmm. How about... "Drake had the plague, and now he is dead." I'll work on it. Now, you must excuse me, Kemp, I am very busy.

He shoves KEMP out the door and closes it shut.

SHAKESPEARE: Jove's bodkin!

There is a sudden knock on the door.

SHAKESPEARE: Ugh! Who is it now?

VOICE BEHIND DOOR: *(It is a female voice that tries to sound male.)* It is I, Squire X.

SHAKESPEARE: *(Both fretful and anxiously hopeful.)* Squire X! *(Opens door.)* Come in, come in. Welcome, good sir. Thank goodness you have arrived. Do you have our special package?

SQUIRE X may be dressed as a man, but it is actually QUEEN ELIZABETH in disguise, although MR. SHAKESPEARE has no idea of this just yet. She produces a manuscript.

QUEEN: Here is the manuscript. Do you have the payment?

SHAKESPEARE: *(Hands her a small pouch.)* I know it is a mere trifle to Her Majesty. Please tell Her Majesty once again how humbled I am that she has chosen my meager name to be placed beneath the titles of her most wonderful plays.

QUEEN: And the truth continues to be concealed? No one else knows of the clandestine arrangement between yourself and her highness?

SHAKESPEARE: Her secret is still safe and will remain so.

QUEEN: *(Hands him the manuscript.)* Then here is the newest play for your Globe Theater.

SHAKESPEARE: Thank goodness. My investors have been most anxious. What is this one called?

QUEEN: "As You Like It."

SHAKESPEARE: Oh, I would like any title. It doesn't matter to me.

QUEEN: No, that is the title. "As You Like It," the seventh play by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

SHAKESPEARE: Discretion, please. I am fearful that my thespians are beginning to catch on. It would be most calamitous if the populous were to discover the truth.

QUEEN: Is the secret too much for your weak spirit? You can't bear the shame of lying?

SHAKESPEARE: Shame? I am an actor, sir. Lying is my profession. It is the notoriety, the expectation, the fame that has become bothersome. Everyone expects me to speak in iambic pantomimer.

QUEEN: Pentameter.

SHAKESPEARE: Precisely. They expect me to have the proper pronoun-ciations, and untangle those obscure mythological allusions.

QUEEN: As you said, you are an actor; I am sure you can feign intelligence.

SHAKESPEARE: It was fine in the early days. But so much has changed since then. What was it? Four years ago when you came into my office, the mysterious Squire X, secret member of the court, with a special manuscript penned by our Virgin Queen.

QUEEN: More discretion and less exposition, please.

SHAKESPEARE: Don't misunderstand. The Queen's plays are exquisite, so much better than anything a humble country lad from Stratford could write. But the early plays were straightforward histories like *Henry the Sixth* or fun tales of blood and gore like *Titus Andronicus*. But then Her Majesty became so experimental. Ghosts and fairies and a pathetic prince named Shamlet.

QUEEN: Hamlet.

SHAKESPEARE: See, I can no longer keep track. People want to know where I get my ideas. (*Shrugs.*) Then they ask me to define some of these words. (*Shudders.*) Her Majesty's imagination is running too wild, I fear. (*Looking at the new play.*) See, this is precisely what I am referring to. Her Majesty, beloved and brilliant of course, has written a comedy in which a woman disguises herself as a man. Ludicrous.

QUEEN: Why so?

SHAKESPEARE: It's completely unbelievable. A woman disguised as a man!

QUEEN: But your players play the role of women.

SHAKESPEARE: But that's different. Women are forbidden to act upon the stage, I assume because they would make terrible actresses. My good fellow, Squire X, you know as well as I that only men are convincingly artistic enough for the theatrical arts. Only men have the creative capacity to transcend into another character, to disguise themselves as—

During SHAKESPEARE's sexist tirade, the QUEEN has been removing her squire costume, revealing her regal self. She puts on a tiara just as SHAKESPEARE finally looks at her again. He is incredibly surprised.

SHAKESPEARE: Good lord, it's the Queen! Your Majesty! (*Falls to his knees.*) I – I – I...

QUEEN: I would command you to eat your words, but you seem to be in short supply.

SHAKESPEARE: You – you – you...

QUEEN: You now realize that I have been coming to you these past few years in disguise as Squire X. All my life, I wanted to be a playwright, but instead, I was cursed with a terrible destiny: to become the Queen of England. Coming here, delivering my tragedies and comedies, watching the rehearsal process, listening to my words, those have been the most satisfying moments of my life – even if the dignity of the crown compels me to hide my masterworks behind a second-rate actor such as yourself.

SHAKESPEARE: I grovel before Your Majesty. And I hope you can forgive my foolish words.

QUEEN: So you now agree that "As You Like It" is a comedy that rings true to reality?

SHAKESPEARE: Well...

QUEEN: Well, what? What misgivings have you? And speak the truth.

SHAKESPEARE: It's just that it might be a tad bit confusing. Men will be on stage playing women who are pretending to be men.

QUEEN: Your speech reeks with dull-minded nincompoopery. Has not my deception proven anything to you about the power of the theatre?

SHAKESPEARE: Yes, my Queen, and I humbly beg your pardon. Your Majesty is not only a benevolent matriarch but also a remarkable poet and thespian.

QUEEN: So we needn't change the story? You admit that a woman can successfully disguise herself as a man?

Knock at the door. The QUEEN throws her disguise back on.

KEMP: *(His voice from behind the door.)* It's Kemp, sir!

SHAKESPEARE: Go away!

QUEEN: No, don't go away! *(To SHAKESPEARE.)* A remarkable actor hides in plain sight. *(She opens the door and speaks to KEMP.)* You may come in, good sir Kemp.

KEMP: *(Wearing a dress.)* How do I look?

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