

The Comical Tragical History

^f
William Shakespeare

and

Richard Burbage

r....

Dammit,
Shakespeare!

By Seth Panitch

Seth Panitch

Registered WGAW

Inquiries: (310)945-6290

Dramatis Personae

William Shakespeare

First Actor

Richard Burbage

Second Actor

Edward Alleyn

Third Actor

Ben Jonson

John Hemmings

Solario

A Guard

A Messenger

Anne Shakespeare

Actress

Sara Corax

A YoungWoman

A Barmaid

LIGHTS UP ON:

Elizabethan England. Elizabethan office. Elizabethan WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE at his desk, writing frantically, as he desperately searches for just the right word...

SHAKESPEARE

Dammit!

He violently scratches it out. Tries another word. It's not much better.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

Dammit!

One more, even worse, but before he can curse, the door is hurled open...

BURBAGE

Dammit, Shakespeare!

RICHARD BURBAGE stands in the doorway, holding a rolled up script tightly in his fist. He slams the door behind him and dramatically brandishes the script.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

Do you know what this is?

SHAKESPEARE

No, Richard. I do not.

BURBAGE

It's a copy of your next script. I've just read it.

SHAKESPEARE

Well. What do you think?

BURBAGE

You know *exactly* what I think.

SHAKESPEARE

I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

BURBAGE

I have found you out, sir! You are discovered, debunked, exposed, unmasked, unveiled, and *unbosomed*!

SHAKESPEARE

Richard, if you have a problem with the script, I'd be glad to discuss it with you on the way to rehearsal, which is exactly what the both of us are late for as it is.

Burbage pointedly ignores him and sits down at Shakespeare's vacated desk, opening up the script and reading:

BURBAGE

"The Tempest. Act one, Scene One--"

SHAKESPEARE

Suit yourself--

Shakespeare exits through the door, leaving it ajar...

BURBAGE

So... I suppose I'm to play Prospero.

Shakespeare creeps back in.

SHAKESPEARE

Not necessarily.

(beat)

Although if that's the role you want to *play*--

BURBAGE

Nonsense, Shakespeare. Why would *I* want to play some aging, overbearing, egotistical tyrant? I mean, you obviously didn't have *me* in mind when you penned that role...

SHAKESPEARE

Well...

BURBAGE

No- of course not. Anyway, I thought I was better suited for Ariel- the magical little imp that begs Prospero to release him from his *blackmailed indentured servitude*.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, Richard, I was sort of thinking--

Burbage ignore him, rifling through the script.

BURBAGE

Yes...?

SHAKESPEARE

That perhaps... I might like to play...

BURBAGE
 (halts on a page)
 Quick question about this line.

SHAKESPEARE
 Yes?

BURBAGE
 "Be not afraid- Our revels now are *ended*?"

He looks hard at Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE
 Yes?

BURBAGE
 What exactly do you mean by that?

SHAKESPEARE
 (beat)
 Well, I... Well... It's sort of a... What do you think it means?

Burbage retrieves another copy of *The Tempest* off the desk and tosses it to Shakespeare.

BURBAGE
 Read Act One Scene Two with me.

SHAKESPEARE
 I don't know what you're trying to prove, Richard.

BURBAGE
 Indulge me.

Shakespeare reluctantly opens up the script...

PROSPERO/ BURBAGE
 "How now? Moody?
 What is't thou can'st demand?"

ARIAL/ SHAKESPEARE
 "My Liberty."

PROSPERO/ BURBAGE
 "Dost thou forget
 From what a torment I did free thee?
 Hast thou forgot the foul witch... "Sycorax?"

SHAKESPEARE
 (looking up)
 Problem with the line?

BURBAGE
 The foul witch "Sycorax?"

SHAKESPEARE
 ...Yes?

BURBAGE
 Hmm. That sounds so familiar to me. It has such a... Well-
 such a familiar ring to it.

SHAKESPEARE
 Does it?

BURBAGE
 It certainly does. But I refuse to believe that you would be
 so obvious about it. I must be mistaken. It's so absurd-
 "Sycorax" ... "Sara Corax".... It must be some cosmic
 coincidence. And then there's that fascinating backstory:
 Prospero saves Ariel from her evil clutches- only to blackmail
 him mercilessly... Now forgive my titanic ignorance, but that
 wouldn't have anything to do with us, now, would it?

SHAKESPEARE
 (sighs)
 I can't go unless you release me.

BURBAGE
 (holding up script)
 Unless I release you with *this*?

SHAKESPEARE
 Yes.

BURBAGE
 (pause)
No.

Burbage crosses away, Shakespeare
 chases after him.

SHAKESPEARE
 Come on, Richard! You've seen the dreck I've been writing
 lately. *Pericles*? *Two Noble Kinsmen*? Any roles in there
 you'd like to play? Why don't you get *Jonson* to write
 something for you?

BURBAGE
Jonson? Ben Jonson doesn't know his Ass from his
 Onomatopoeia!

SHAKESPEARE

So write something yourself.

BURBAGE

(seriously)

I can't so that. You know that. Without you, I'm...

SHAKESPEARE

Without me you're "Richard Burbage- The Greatest Actor of our Time!" You don't need a playwright, Richard. You need a *biographer*.

BURBAGE

(rummaging)

I need a drink.

SHAKESPEARE

You never *did* need me. When I met you, you were *already* an actor.

BURBAGE

(chuckling)

No I wasn't. Don't you *remember*? William. Don't you *remember*?

Shakespeare turns to the audience as Burbage fades off.

SHAKESPEARE

He's quite right, you know. He wasn't an actor. He was an alcoholic, who occasionally acted. Edward Alleyn... now *there* was an actor... Or at least that's what everyone thought at the time.

EDWARD ALLEYN makes a grand entrance.

ALLEYN

"*I STAMP! I STARE! I LOOK ABOUT!
I RANT! I RAVE... AND NOW, RUN, I WOULD!*"

He freezes.

SHAKESPEARE

This was called "Heroic Acting."

(looks at Alleyn)

I find it rather difficult to see what was so heroic about it. Thank you, Edward. In the summer of 1591, after yet another winter of casting discontent, I wrote a play called Richard the Third. On the basis of that script, I was offered a coveted position in the Lord Strange's Men, on the condition that Edward Alleyn play "Richard." There was only one problem: my play had achieved some sort of notoriety as being an "Actor Trap." Doomed to fail. Too long. Too vicious....

ALLEYN

Not enough *exclamation points* in it. Sorry my boy, I never accept any role that has anything less than seventy-five *exclamation points* in it.

SHAKESPEARE

(wincing)

How many does "Richard" have?

ALLEYN

Twenty-two.

He unceremoniously tosses the SCRIPT back to Shakespeare and exits.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I asked every actor in the company. Every actor save one, of course. Richard Burbage- the Manager's Son. Richard Burbage Jr., I guess. I needed an Actor, and although Richard Burbage's name appeared more often in punchlines than on posters, there I was, rushing over to the Porpentine...

THE PORPENTINE TAVERN

A young, drunk RICHARD BURBAGE is draped over a small table, staring into a mostly empty mug of ale.

SHAKESPEARE

Excuse me... Mr. Burbage?

BURBAGE

(drunkenly)

Leave me alone. I paid it already.

SHAKESPEARE

No, that's not why I'm here-

BURBAGE

(lifting his head)

Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know she was your wife-

SHAKESPEARE

But-

BURBAGE

-your daughter.

SHAKESPEARE

But-

BURBAGE
(winces)

-your son?

SHAKESPEARE
(sits)

Look here, Mr. Burbage-

BURBAGE
(leaps to his feet)

How dare you, sir!

SHAKESPEARE

What?

BURBAGE

How dare you! Can't a man drink in peace without you pimping your bills on him?

SHAKESPEARE

But I'm not-

BURBAGE

Damn you and damn your pithy pathetic explanations. Must my entire existence be ruled by the whim of your ledger? Have you no soul sir?

SHAKESPEARE

What?

BURBAGE

A soul. A *soul*. That thing which you seek in sucking the lifeblood of others.

(drops his voice)

Bit of a pervert too, aren't you?

SHAKESPEARE

Wha-?

BURBAGE

Looking up old ladies dresses, sniffing the seats after the customers leave-

SHAKESPEARE

Mr. Burbage, I demand an end-

BURBAGE

And I demand an end to this Godless badgering of the working class!

(beat)

Wait a moment. You're What's His Name, right? The new poet?

SHAKESPEARE
 (utterly confounded)
 William Shakespeare. I think.

BURBAGE
 Let me see your hand.

Shakespeare reluctantly extends his
 hand. Burbage studies his palm.
 Grumbles disapprovingly:

BURBAGE (cont'd)
 You've only written four plays.

SHAKESPEARE
 (looking at his hand, amazed)
 My God. How can you tell?

BURBAGE
 Someone told me.

Burbage gives up and grabs the script.

BURBAGE (cont'd)
 So- this is the little beauty they're all talking about. The
 Humpback Play.

SHAKESPEARE
 Hunchback.

BURBAGE
 (beat)
 Got a Richard the Third yet?

SHAKESPEARE
 No.

BURBAGE
 Then, I guess we'll call it the "Humpback" play, won't we?
 (thumbs through it)
 So, what's wrong with it?

SHAKESPEARE
 What's wrong with what?

BURBAGE
 Well, you're an actor, right? Look at all these damn lines.
 It's gorgeous. Why aren't you playing it?

SHAKESPEARE
 (immediately uncomfortable)
Me? Well, I... I'm not quite *right* for the role.

BURBAGE
(looking closely at him)

Is that so?

Shakespeare snatches the script back.

SHAKESPEARE
Mr. Burbage- have you actually *played* a leading role?

BURBAGE
Oh, sure. All the time.

SHAKESPEARE
Really?

BURBAGE
(already forgotten)
What did I say?

SHAKESPEARE
You said you have.

BURBAGE
Well, there it *is*.
(confidentially)
They *beg* for me, you know. "Mr. Burbage," that's what they call me, "Mr. Burbage, play *this* for me, play *that* for me!" But I won't do just *anything*, you know. I have to think of my fans... And then, there's my *reputation!*

SHAKESPEARE
I should tell you- you're not my first choice.

BURBAGE
(pause)
Of course I'm not.
(beat)
But you're *here*, aren't you?... And that, my friend, makes me your *only* choice.

They stare at each other.

Shakespeare slides the script over...

Burbage reaches out and grasps it...

MUSIC. Scene shift...

BACKSTAGE - RICHARD III

EDWARD ALLEYN enters majestically.

ALLEYN

Places! Places everyone! It's Magic Time.

(pause)

Well, it's as magical as its going to get without *me* on the stage. Places, you peons!

He sweeps up to Burbage, who is frantically fumbling with his HUMP.

ALLEYN (cont'd)

Excuse me. I can't seem to get past your *hump*.

BURBAGE

Sorry, Mr. Alleyn.

Burbage clears, but Alleyn continues to stare at him.

ALLEYN

We are at places, young man. If you need to make any last minute alterations, pray make them in the costume shop.

(beat)

Wait a moment- you're the Burbage Boy aren't you?

BURBAGE

Yes.

ALLEYN

Your first lead tonight, eh?

BURBAGE

Yes.

ALLEYN

Poor boy. You must be terribly nervous.

BURBAGE

Yes. Yes I am.

ALLEYN

I don't blame you. Nothing worse than the humiliation of falling on your face in front of a thousand people. Not that I ever have, of course, but I've seen it happen to others. Horrible. Just horrible. As if the taunts and threats aren't bad enough, they have to throw fruit at you. And not your regular garden variety either- large, messy, rancid fruits those bastards grow specifically for the purpose of hurling them at unsuspecting actors. And have you seen that audience out there today? They're not waiting for a play- they're waiting for an execution! Glad I'm not going on in this stinker, I can tell you that. Ah well... Carry on!

He grandly exits. Shakespeare spots Burbage and rushes over.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh- there you are! Good luck, Burbage.

BURBAGE

(deeply shaken)

Good bye, Shakespeare.

He drops the hump and goes.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard... Richard? What the hell are you doing?

BURBAGE

If you'll excuse me- I have a date with the inside of a whiskey bottle.

Shakespeare blocks the door.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

Move away from that door, William. One place you do not want to be is in between me and my intoxication.

SHAKESPEARE

What is the matter with you?

BURBAGE

I can't do this! Who are we kidding, William. I'm Servant #2, I'm Lady in Waiting #7, on Wednesdays, I'm the Third Eunuch From the Left! One thing I am not is Richard III. Want to know who I am? I'm "Burbage's Son." That's who I am. I'm "Edward Alleyn's Understudy."

SHAKESPEARE

What a joy! To be Burbage's Son? Or Alleyn's Understudy? I'm nothing! I'm "What's his Name." I'm "Who Are You?" I'm "What The Hell Are You Doing Backstage?" That's who I am. But this play is going to change all that. Tonight. For both of us. So put on your hump and get the hell out there!

Shakespeare ties on the hump, as the words of Henry V spill out of him...

SHAKESPEARE / HENRY V

*"Once more unto the breach dear friend once more!
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage!
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry "God for Harry, England and Saint George!"*

Shakespeare retreats, as Burbage is hit with a blinding SPOTLIGHT.

He hesitates...

BURBAGE / RICHARD III

"*Now is the winter of our discontent...*"

(suddenly, he smiles, fueled by the attention...)

"*Made glorious summer by this son of York.*"

He freezes. Shakespeare comes forward and contemplates the frozen Burbage.

SHAKESPEARE

In that moment, I felt the deepest sympathy for Richard Burbage. In Roman times, an unpopular actor could be stoned. The Elizabethan audience is somewhat crueller...

Uproarious applause.

Confused, Burbage steps forward and bows. He motions to Shakespeare, who hesitantly comes forward. Both men bow.

The applause dies. Lights change...

BACKSTAGE

The two men turn to each other.

BURBAGE

What was *that*?

SHAKESPEARE

I'm not quite sure. I think... I think they liked it!

BURBAGE

Wait a minute- William... Are we a success?

SHAKESPEARE

I don't know. Do you *think*?

BURBAGE

I think we are. I think we did it!

SHAKESPEARE

(crossing away, trying to contain himself)

No, no, no, no- This is impossible.

BURBAGE

(following)

What are we going to do? I'm not prepared to be famous.

SHAKESPEARE

They said I didn't have the education-

BURBAGE

-I'll have to learn to be color coordinated-

SHAKESPEARE

-They called me "Upstart Crow"-

BURBAGE

-William!

(grabs him)

Ben Jonson was out there tonight!

SHAKESPEARE

Ben Jonson can kiss my ass!

Grabs Burbage in a bear hug.

BURBAGE

OWWW!!!

SHAKESPEARE

What? What did I do?

BURBAGE

The uh... The *hump*. It hurts when you-

SHAKESPEARE

Oh. I'm-

(assists him)

I'm sorry. I just got so-

BURBAGE

I know. I know. Can you please...?

Shakespeare unfastens the hump.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

Thanks.

(long pause)

So. I guess we're supposed to go get drunk now.

SHAKESPEARE

I guess so.

(beat)

But weren't you always drunk before?

BURBAGE

Well, sure. But tonight, I'll be a *successful* drunk.

SHAKESPEARE

(grins)

Of course. I'll wait for you outside.

He turns to leave-

BURBAGE

William?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes...?

BURBAGE

(pause)

What did... What did you think?

Shakespeare thinks on this for quite some time. Then, guardedly...

SHAKESPEARE

Pretty good Burbage. Keep working on it.

He crosses outside the dressing area to wait for Burbage, who grumbles and gathers his things.

BURBAGE

"Pretty good, Burbage. Keep working on it."

He crosses up deeper into the backstage area, as a YOUNG WOMAN (**later revealed as SARA CORAX**) anxiously approaches Shakespeare "outside..."

OUTSIDE THE THEATER

YOUNG WOMAN

Excuse me?

SHAKESPEARE

(taken with her)

Oh. Hello. Yes?

YOUNG WOMAN

(hopeful)

Were... were you in the play?

SHAKESPEARE

Uh... No. Not exactly.
 (she is crestfallen)
 I did write it, though.

YOUNG WOMAN

(disinterested)
 Oh really? That must be... That's... nice. That's very nice.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes. It is. It's... nice.
 (beat)
 Did you like it?

YOUNG WOMAN

Oh yes, I liked *him* very much.

SHAKESPEARE

Him?

YOUNG WOMAN

Yes. The... you know, "Richard." The man who played Richard.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard Burbage?

YOUNG WOMAN

Do you know him?

SHAKESPEARE

I certainly do.

YOUNG WOMAN

He's so... really? If I could just meet him, I-

SHAKESPEARE

He'll be right out.

YOUNG WOMAN

Right *here*? I... thank you. Thank you so much.
 (shakes his hand)

Thank you.

She adjusts herself as Shakespeare
 trudges off.

YOUNG WOMAN (cont'd)

So- you... you wrote all those words, right?

SHAKESPEARE
(stops)

Yes. I did.

YOUNG WOMAN
Well, that's... quite an accomplishment, isn't it?

SHAKESPEARE
(realizing)

No. Not really.

He leaves as Burbage "exits," walking
past the star struck woman.

YOUNG WOMAN
Mr. Burbage?

BURBAGE
Hmm? Oh, no- I'm his son. His office is right back over-

YOUNG WOMAN
No, I was... I was waiting for you. You're Richard Burbage,
right?

BURBAGE
Yes... Yes I am.

YOUNG WOMAN
I feel incredibly bold, and I hope you will forgive me for
barging backstage like this-

BURBAGE
Oh, no- of course not-

YOUNG WOMAN
-but I, well... Wow!

BURBAGE
Are you okay?

YOUNG WOMAN
I'm sorry. I'm a little... I'm a little nervous.

BURBAGE
You're kidding.

YOUNG WOMAN
Well, I... I'm just going to say it. You are... that was the
most amazing thing I have ever seen in my life. You were so
eloquent, so... passionate, so... well. I'm speechless.

BURBAGE

(long pause)

Very convincing. How much did he pay you for this?

(calls out)

Very funny Shakespeare!

YOUNG WOMAN

Who's Shakespeare?

BURBAGE

Who's... huh? He's the Poet. He's the guy that wrote the play. You don't know-

YOUNG WOMAN

(moving closer)

I'm staying at the Boar's Head Tavern.

BURBAGE

(obliviously)

I've heard that's a very nice place.

YOUNG WOMAN

Room seven.

BURBAGE

Uh huh. Nice view?

YOUNG WOMAN

Very nice view.

BURBAGE

Right. Well, they tell me-

She places a KEY in his palm.

YOUNG WOMAN

I'll see you in an hour.

BURBAGE

Yes. Yes you will.

YOUNG WOMAN

You were amazing tonight.

She kisses him and leaves.

Astonished, looks out into the audience and asks...

BURBAGE / RICHARD III

"Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?

Was ever woman in this humour won?

My Dukedom to a widow's chastity,

*I do mistake my person all this while!
Upon my life she finds, although I cannot,
Myself to be a marv' llous proper man!
Shine out fair Sun, till I have bought a glass,
That I may see my shadow as I pass."*

Blackout.

Music. Lights up on...

THE REHEARSAL- ROMEO AND JULIET

Burbage addressing an imaginary balcony. Loudly, powerfully, without the slightest clue what he is saying...

BURBAGE

"But SOFT! What light through-!"

Shakespeare leaps up onto the stage.

SHAKESPEARE

Whoa, whoa, WHOA! I think you just woke up the entire city of Verona.

BURBAGE

Okay, William- if I'm so awful why don't you play it? You already know the lines. Besides, I think the guy playing Juliet has a big crush on you.

SHAKESPEARE

(beat)

Me...? On the stage...? Oh no, I don't- I don't think that's a very good idea. I have to... You know, it's better if I...

BURBAGE

What's the matter with you? You're an actor. Do the role.

SHAKESPEARE

(explodes)

DAMMIT BURBAGE, I DON'T WANT TO DO THE ROLE!!!

BURBAGE

(taken aback)

Alright. Fine. So what do you want me to do?

SHAKESPEARE / HAMLET

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue! Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature, for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end was, and is, to hold, as 'twere, the "mirror up to Nature."

BURBAGE

I like that. That's very nice. "The mirror up to Nature."

SHAKESPEARE

Thank you.

BURBAGE

That's beautiful. I have absolutely no idea what that means, but that is really beautiful.

SHAKESPEARE

You don't...? Okay, Richard. Look. Up there. There she is. There's Juliet.

(pulls him to his knees)

Do you see her? On the balcony. There. She's waiting for you.

BURBAGE

She is?

SHAKESPEARE

She's waiting for you to speak. You stand up.

(he does)

Now. What do you say?

BURBAGE

(halts)

What?

SHAKESPEARE

What do you say?

BURBAGE

I don't know.

SHAKESPEARE

What do you mean, you don't know?

BURBAGE

Well, I haven't gotten that far. In the script.

Goes to get his script.

SHAKESPEARE

Forget the script. What do you say?

BURBAGE

(finding his place)

I say: "SPEAK AGAIN BRIGHT ANGEL!"

SHAKESPEARE

(takes the script)

Forget the script. Just *speaks* to her.

BURBAGE

Okay. Give me the script.

SHAKESPEARE

(backing away)

Speak to her. Speak to her Richard.

BURBAGE

Give me the *script*, William. If you give me the script, I can speak to her.

SHAKESPEARE

What do you say to her, Richard?

BURBAGE

Give me...

(lunges and misses)

Give me the script!

SHAKESPEARE

What do you say?

BURBAGE

(explodes)

I don't say a goddamned thing! Okay William? I don't say a goddamned thing! I sit under her window and I stammer. Or I stutter. Because I don't have the *words*. And I pray for her to notice that the situation is becoming more and more embarrassing for the both of us by the minute. And I pray for her to leave. And she *leaves*. So there's "Real Life" for you. Now give me back my script.

Burbage rips the script out of Shakespeare's hands. Relaxing, he slowly opens it, reverently, and softly reads the first words...

BURBAGE / ROMEO

"But soft, what light through yonder window breaks...?"

Suddenly, a crash, as... ANNE HATHAWAY bursts in, terrifying the men. She is not in a good mood. Ever.

BURBAGE

Anne!

SHAKESPEARE

Wife!

ANNE

William. I thought I'd find you skulking around back here.

Burbage slips away. Shakespeare
attempts in vain to follow...

SHAKESPEARE

(attempting to leave)

Actually, I was just-

ANNE

Will, you talk too much. Every time I come down here, it
takes all the strength of my being to get a word edgewise
with you.

SHAKESPEARE

I-

ANNE

There you go again, you clap trap! Can't I say a word
without you poking in your two cents? Look at me. I am a
wasted woman, William. Wasting away while I wait in vain for
you to come home to Stratford. No one to share my heart
with. No one to love.

SHAKESPEARE

What about the children?

ANNE

Screw the children! I'm talking about Love. Love love.

(beat)

So- how are you?

SHAKESPEARE

Fine Anne. Nice of you to ask.

ANNE

Face it, Will, acting's not for you. You technically have to
act to be an Actor, you know.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, you'll be pleased to hear I'm not intending to act
anytime soon.

ANNE

Oh, really?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, and being a writer wasn't the point in the first place,
so I was thinking of giving that up as well.

ANNE

Good. Pack your things. I'm taking you back to Stratford.

SHAKESPEARE
(freezes)

I can't.

ANNE

You *can't*?

SHAKESPEARE

Uhn uh.

ANNE

Why not?

SHAKESPEARE

I can't. Like I said. I'm doing things. Here- in London.

ANNE

What are you doing?

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I'm... I'm... I'm writing a new play.

ANNE

You just said you were giving it up.

SHAKESPEARE

When?

ANNE

Right now.

SHAKESPEARE

No I didn't.

ANNE

I distinctly heard you. You said-

SHAKESPEARE

(bursts out)

I know what I said because I *said* it. And I most certainly did not say *that*!

ANNE

(impressed)

Well. What's the play about?

SHAKESPEARE

Well... now that you mention it...

(hits him)

You, really.

Music. Blackout.

REHEARSAL- TAMING OF THE SHREW

THIRD ACTOR (JOHN HEMMINGS), as Kate,
in wig, triumphant. Burbage paces,
frustrated in a corner. Shakespeare
coaches him on like a fighter.

SHAKESPEARE

Dammit, Burbage! Hemmings is walking all over you! You've got to take control of him!

BURBAGE

How? He's such a *bitch*.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, Richard. That is the point of the show. You're taming a *shrew*, right?

(sighs)

Okay, John take a breather.

Hemmings shrugs and leaves the wig on
the desk, passing Burbage on the way
out.

HEMMINGS

C'mon, Dick. Kiss and make up.

BURBAGE

You stay away from me.

HEMMINGS

Or what?

BURBAGE

Or I'll scream and cry until you do.

Hemmings exits.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard, this is going in front of the Queen. Thursday.

BURBAGE

So am I.

SHAKESPEARE

What?

BURBAGE

I'm going in front of the Queen as well, you know.

SHAKESPEARE

Then you ought be concerned too, yes?
 (dons the wig)

From the top.

Burbage resumes playing Petrucio;
 Shakespeare- Katerina. The play starts
 rough, and gets rougher...

BURBAGE / PETRUCIO

*"Kate of my consolation,
 Hearing thy mildness prais'd in every town,
 Myself am mov'd to woo thee for my wife."*

SHAKESPEARE / KATE

*"Mov'd, in good time! Let him that mov'd you hither
 Remove you hence. I knew you at the first
 You were a movable."*

BURBAGE / PETRUCIO

"Why, what's a movable?"

SHAKESPEARE / KATE

"A joint stool."

BURBAGE / PETRUCIO

"Thou hast hit it. Sit on me."

SHAKESPEARE / KATE

"Asses are made to bear, and so are you."

BURBAGE / PETRUCIO

"Nay, women are made to bear, and so are you."

He spanks "her" bottom. "She" strikes
 him hard.

BURBAGE / PETRUCIO (cont'd)

(more burbage than Petrucio)

"I swear I'll cuff you if you strike again."

Shakespeare whacks Burbage, who whacks
 him back. They pull out of the scene:

SHAKESPEARE

Ow! What's the matter with you?

BURBAGE

You started it.

SHAKESPEARE

I was being a shrew!

BURBAGE
Yeah, William? What else is new?

SHAKESPEARE
Well!

He whacks Burbage again.

BURBAGE
That's it. Grab a weapon, sir.

They turn upstage, and two RAPIERS are
thrown to them.

SHAKESPEARE
Your move.

BURBAGE
Why mine?

SHAKESPEARE
... I don't know any.

BURBAGE
If you insist.

The battle music begins.

They fight- on the lines, as well as
between them...

BURBAGE (cont'd)
You know something, Shakespeare- you're not too bad at this.
When you give up scribbling, I imagine you could make a very
respectable living as a punching bag.

They fight

SHAKESPEARE
Well- it can be terribly difficult finding the right vocation.
Although it seems you found yours quite easily. How did you do
it?

BURBAGE
How did I do what?

SHAKESPEARE
How did you settle so quickly on mediocrity?

They fight.

BURBAGE
You mean, as a profession?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes.

BURBAGE

Well, it was sort of forced upon me.

SHAKESPEARE

Forced upon you?

BURBAGE

(corners Shakespeare)

Yes, forced upon me.

(disarms him)

Like every one of your *plays*!

Shakespeare kicks Burbage in his groin.
He collapses. Music halts.

SHAKESPEARE

That is no way to talk to a woman!

BURBAGE

(catching his breath)

I really think you ought to play the Shrew, William. You obviously have a good handle on the role.

SHAKESPEARE

Forced upon you, eh?

BURBAGE

What?

SHAKESPEARE

Forced upon you? My *plays* were all *forced* upon you?

BURBAGE

(relenting)

No, that's not what I-

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I certainly wouldn't want to *force* you. In fact, I'm quite amazed- I didn't think I had the wherewithal to force you to do anything! I mean, for God's sake- I've been trying to force you to *act* for the last few years now!

BURBAGE

Oh, so now we come to it! I'm a bad actor, aren't I? I'm mangling your verse. I'm ruining your precious plays! I was wondering when you were going to get *that* off your chest!

SHAKESPEARE

Well, wonder no more!

BURBAGE

You know, if I make you so unhappy, I could always go back to Henslowe and Edward Alleyn. You'd like that, wouldn't you?

SHAKESPEARE

No, of course not, Richard... I wouldn't wish you on *anyone*!

Burbage simmers. Lowers his voice:

BURBAGE

He's made an offer, you know.

SHAKESPEARE

(beat)

What?

BURBAGE

Philip Henslowe. He's made me an offer.

SHAKESPEARE

Really?

BURBAGE

Yes.

SHAKESPEARE

(masking his fear)

And what do you intend to do about it?

BURBAGE

(masking his)

I'm not sure.

SHAKESPEARE

You're not *sure*?

BURBAGE

No. What do you think I should do?

SHAKESPEARE

(gasps)

Oh! Well, take the job, by all means! He pays much better than I ever could!

BURBAGE

You want me to *accept*?

SHAKESPEARE

Certainly! What's to stop you?

BURBAGE

Well then... *you've* convinced me!

Very well! SHAKESPEARE

I'm going. BURBAGE

So go! SHAKESPEARE

Burbage takes a few steps. Turns.

Thank you for the advice. BURBAGE

You're welcome. SHAKESPEARE

Goodbye. BURBAGE

Farewell. SHAKESPEARE

Burbage takes a few more.

I'm going now. BURBAGE

You must be overjoyed. SHAKESPEARE

You'll never see me again. BURBAGE

The ecstasy! SHAKESPEARE

As you wish! BURBAGE

Burbage goes for the door. Spins back.

Huh? BURBAGE (cont'd)
(excited)

What? SHAKESPEARE
(excited)

What- what did you say? BURBAGE

SHAKESPEARE

I didn't say anything.

BURBAGE

Oh. Good. It's time I was off.

SHAKESPEARE

You'd better hurry, then.

BURBAGE

Good bye.

SHAKESPEARE

Good day.

BURBAGE

Good night.

SHAKESPEARE

Good luck.

BURBAGE

Adieu... "Parting is such sweet-"

SHAKESPEARE

-Don't even *think* it!

Shakespeare storms off. Burbage faces the audience, lost.

BURBAGE

Don't worry about me. I'm a survivor. Like a cat, I always end up on my feet. Worry about William. I've got options.

(considers)

Philip Henslowe. A pioneer of all the new forms. New ways of speaking, new styles of movement on the stage. I like the old forms, you know, "mirror up to nature," but... Well, the problem with the Old Forms is... they're not *new*. And audiences, today... they like new. Then again, nothing's newer than Ben Jonson. He's all the rage. I'd work for him- in a second- if only I could understand a single word he said...

Music. Light fade to...

THE PORPENTINE

Shakespeare drowning his sorrows in a pint of ale. The door is flung open, and BEN JONSON prances in, striking a self important pose in the doorway, to ensure all are made aware of both his arrival, and its import.

JONSON

"I fear I shall begin to grow in love with my own dear self and my most prosperous parts! They do so spring and burgeon... I can feel a whimsy in my blood. I know not how- success hath made me wanton!"

He bounds up to an unimpressed BARMAID.

JONSON (cont'd)

Barkeep! A *cannikin* of corruption! A potent pot of *Romagnaa!*

BARMAID

A *what?*

JONSON

A drink, dear. A drink.

She pours, and he gazes at her.

JONSON (cont'd)

By Nestor's hernia, thou art the most *beauteous* maid I ever set eyes on!

BARMAID

Oh, go on.

JONSON

I kid thee not. Look into my eyes. Look deep. Tell me what you see.

BARMAID

Lust.

JONSON

Behind that.

BARMAID

Lechery.

JONSON

Pour the drink. Pour the drink.

He leans back against the bar and spots Shakespeare, hiding in the corner.

JONSON (cont'd)

Well! Bless my *scotomy!* William Shakespeare- the Toast of the Sanitarium!

SHAKESPEARE

Ben Jonson- you Literary Laxative! How the hell are you?

JONSON

(sitting)

Well, sir, well. And how is London's second leading playwright?

SHAKESPEARE

Not bad, Jonson. Not bad. Oh- I finally got a chance to see "Volpone." Very chancy, Ben- very daring.

JONSON

(flattered)

You thought it was daring?

SHAKESPEARE

No, I thought calling it a *comedy* was daring.

JONSON

Touché, William. Once again you have exhibited the daunting wit that only the finest Eighth Grade education can produce.

SHAKESPEARE

Ninth- I wanted to stay in school long enough so that I could fully appreciate your plays.

JONSON

Tremor Cordia.

SHAKESPEARE

What the blazes is that supposed to mean?

JONSON

I have no idea, but it certainly sounds impressive. Listen, William- I've heard the most awful news. I've heard that Richard Burbage has left the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

SHAKESPEARE

(pause)

You heard right.

JONSON

Of course I did. Listen, William- may I call you Bill?

SHAKESPEARE

No.

JONSON

Listen, *Billy*, now that your company is disintegrating faster than one of your second acts, why don't you reconsider my offer and join my company?

SHAKESPEARE

I already have a company.

JONSON

A Company has a leading actor, William. You have four Ingenues, three character actors, and a manic depressive transvestite clown with suicidal tendencies. That is not a Company- that is a Catastrophe.

SHAKESPEARE

(sighs)

What's your offer?

JONSON

Join up.

SHAKESPEARE

And do what?

JONSON

Write.

SHAKESPEARE

And what will you do?

JONSON

Oh, I'll write too. I'll write "by Ben Jonson" on the front of your plays.

SHAKESPEARE

(stands)

No thanks. I'll stick with my catastrophe.

JONSON

You can't write without a Leading Man, Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE

Doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, you Senaecan Tragedy of a man. I'm done. I quit. Yes. You stand alone now, Jonson. You stand alone in the Heaven that is Mediocrity.

JONSON

Well. Sweet dreams to your brief, but unremarkable career.

(stands)

Sorry your Idiot flew the coop, and all.

SHAKESPEARE

(rising)

What did you say?

JONSON

I said, sorry your Idiot-

Shakespeare suddenly PUNCHES Jonson right in the nose.

SHAKESPEARE

Say what you want about me, you excessively educated twit, but don't you dare say a thing against Burbage! He's the best damn actor I've ever seen.

Shakespeare seethes, even more surprised than Jonson at the outburst.

JONSON

How touching. How sad. He's gone. Forever.

He checks his nose and sees blood.

He screams like a child.

JONSON (cont'd)

Officer! Officer!

He flees out as the GUARD enters, grabs him, and throws him out the door...

Lights fade into...

THE JAIL

The GUARD tosses Shakespeare into a cell.

SHAKESPEARE

If you think this meager cell in any way dims my resolve-

BURLY GUARD

Shaddup ya prevert!

He stomps off. Shakespeare resigns himself to his surroundings. There is a MAN lying in the corner of the cell, asleep. Shakespeare plops down beside the man and he wakes, rolling over-

It is Burbage. Both men freeze.

BURBAGE

Terrific- this dream again. Alright Shakespeare, tell me I'm a crummy actor. Come on. Laugh at me. Point your finger at me. Humiliate me- come on, let's get it over with. Wait a minute-

(looks at himself)

I'm all dressed in this one.

(looks hard at Shakespeare)

And you don't have horns. Huh.

SHAKESPEARE

This is no dream, Richard.

Burbage comes to his senses...

BURBAGE
Oh no.

SHAKESPEARE
Oh yes.

BURBAGE
Oh hell.

BOTH
Oh GUARD!

The Guard reappears.

BURLY GUARD
Alright, ya preverts. What's the preversion now?

BURBAGE
I'm sorry, but I must request another room here. I refuse to be incarcerated with that man.

Shakespeare approaches the guard.

SHAKESPEARE
Look... I know you and I have sort of gotten off on the wrong foot here, due to my... uh...

BURLY GUARD
Preversions.

SHAKESPEARE
Right- but I feel it would be in the best interests of this establishment if you separated the two of us. Believe me.

GUARD
You too, huh?
(shakes his head at Burbage)
What *is* it with you?

He stalks off.

SHAKESPEARE
What does he mean by that?

BURBAGE
I'm not talking to you.
(silence)
What are you doing in here?

SHAKESPEARE

Don't ask.

(beat)

I thought you weren't talking to me.

BURBAGE

I'm *not*.

Silence.

SHAKESPEARE

What are you doing in here?

BURBAGE

I knocked Ben Jonson's big fat nose off his pompous face.

SHAKESPEARE

(chuckles)

I see. Why?

BURBAGE

(long pause)

He said something I didn't agree with.

SHAKESPEARE

He does that.

They regard each other for a moment.
Shakespeare breaks the silence,
changing the subject.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

So, this is wonderful- cozy accommodations... short walk to the bathroom... how did we get the luxury suite all to ourselves?

BURBAGE

Long story.

SHAKESPEARE

It appears you have the time to tell it.

He sits down on the cell floor.

BURBAGE

Well, this place wasn't always so spacious. You see, I had a few roommates yesterday, but the moment I entered the cell something happened.

SHAKESPEARE

(dramatically)

You demanded another cell.

BURBAGE

No! *They* did! The vagrants demanded another cell. The pickpockets demanded another cell. The drunkards sobered up, recognized an actor, and demanded another cell! They were given a choice between this cell and the one next door. They chose next door.

SHAKESPEARE

Who was next door?

BURBAGE

Two lepers, a lawyer, and a man who claims to be Jesus Christ.

SHAKESPEARE

Is he?

BURBAGE

I don't know, but by the sound of it, the lawyer's convinced him to sue his Father for reckless abandonment. Oh, William, I can't joke about this anymore. The lepers looked down their noses at me- well the ones *with* noses did, the others just sort of...*looked*. You know something, I was more respected and better liked when I was an unemployed alcoholic.

SHAKESPEARE

I know. Being a nobody was a good deal more respectable than this.

BURBAGE

Not exactly what you had in mind, is it?

SHAKESPEARE

Not exactly.

BURBAGE

Well, there are *other* professions, of course.

SHAKESPEARE

Of course.

Silence, as they try to come up with a palatable one...

BURBAGE

Philosopher.

SHAKESPEARE

I think you'd make a fantastic philosopher.

BURBAGE

Yes. I would. I would philosophize about all manner of things. The less sense you make, the more philosophy you speak. It's perfect for me.

SHAKESPEARE

Torturer.

BURBAGE

You'd be a natural. You're smashing in black.

SHAKESPEARE

I know, but I couldn't abide the hood.

BURBAGE

They'll have to let you do it hoodless.

SHAKESPEARE

I believe that's the very crux of the ensemble.

BURBAGE

Torturer's out.

SHAKESPEARE

Public Service.

BURBAGE

Politics or Sewage?

SHAKESPEARE

Richard- if you delineate between the two, how can you ever expect to do either of them well?

They laugh.

BURBAGE

Well, there's always the Clergy, right?

SHAKESPEARE

Aren't you too covetous for the Clergy?

BURBAGE

You've read the news, William- I'm not covetous *enough*.

SHAKESPEARE

(chuckles)

Well, that leaves us *where* exactly?

BURBAGE

A couple of actors sitting around on a bed of manure.

SHAKESPEARE

Not me, Richard. I'm out. I'm sick of funny little plot twists and bed tricks. I'm tired of mistaken identity, slap stick and sword fights.

BURBAGE

So write something else.

SHAKESPEARE

Such as...?

BURBAGE

I'm a Moron- how the hell should I know? What do you want to write about?

SHAKESPEARE

Something else. Something different. I want to write about *me*. I want to write about the way people look at me when I tell them I'm a writer. The way they laugh at me when I fail and fall silent when I succeed.

(looks around at the cell)

This. I want to write about this.

BURBAGE

So do it.

SHAKESPEARE

If I write about this, I'll end up *back* in this.

BURBAGE

Not if you're clever about it. Not if you use *me* to say it.

Shakespeare stares at Burbage for a long moment.

SHAKESPEARE

It may be my words up there, Richard, but its your ass.

BURBAGE

Look around, William. What have I got to lose?

Lights transition...

CROWD NOISE: BOOS...

Shakespeare walks around to his desk and removes a small YARMULKE, and firmly places it on Burbage's head. Burbage nods, and Shakespeare withdraws.

HECKLES: "Get off the stage!"

Lights cross fade into "stage light."

"Onstage" now in *Merchant of Venice*,
Burbage slowly turns to face the
"crowd's" full derision.

ANOTHER ACTOR (SOLERIO/SOLANIO) enters,
cowering from the assault.

SOLERIO/ SOLANIO

"How now, Shylock? What news among the merchants?"

The crowd bellows. Burbage hesitates.

SOLERIO/ SOLANIO (cont'd)

Go on, Dick! Get on with it!

BURBAGE / SHYLOCK

(forging on)

"You knew. None so well, none so well as you of my Daughter's
flight."

SOLERIO/ SOLANIO

"That's certain. I for my part knew the yailor that made the
wings she flew withal."

(crowd- laughter)

"But tell me, do you hear whether Antonio have any loss at
sea?"

BURBAGE / SHYLOCK

"There I have another bad match. A bankrout, a prodigal, who
dare scarce show his head on the Rialto. A beggar, that was
used to come so smug upon the mart."

(more noise)

"Let him look to his bond."

(crowd yells)

"He was wont to call me usurer, let him look to his bond!"

(louder)

"He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy- let him
look to his bond!"

Solario backs off, preparing for the
audience reaction that will surely
follow...

SOLERIO/ SOLANIO

"Why I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh-
what's that good for?"

An eruption of laughter. Burbage yells
out into it, finally directing his fury
at the audience:

BURBAGE / SHYLOCK

"TO BAIT FISH WITHAL!"

The crowd immediately silences.

BURBAGE / SHYLOCK (cont'd)

"If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million. Laughed at my loses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be, by Christian example, why Revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard, but I will better the instruction!"

Silence.

Scattered applause. It builds to an ovation.

Burbage becomes the gracious actor. CHEERS. He bows. Cheers. Bows again.

Lights fade to TWO SPOTLIGHTS: One on Burbage, bowing, the other on the seated Shakespeare, only able to watch.

Lights fade on Burbage, but the applause continues, almost deafening.

Shakespeare puts his hands over his ears to drown out the roar as it consumes him, torturing him.

Lights fade...

Blackout.

ACT TWO

ONSTAGE AT THE GLOBE: JULIUS CAESAR

Lights up on Burbage as MARC ANTONY.

BURBAGE / ANTONY

*"Friends, Romans, Countrymen..."*Burbage's face goes blank.Lights up on Shakespeare in the
PROMPTER'S BOX.

SHAKESPEARE

(prompting)

"Lend... me... your..."

BURBAGE / ANTONY

*"Lend me your ears!**I come... I come... I'm coming to do...**Something."* What the hell am I coming to do?

SHAKESPEARE

(enjoying this)

"I... come... to... bury-

BURBAGE / ANTONY

"I come to bury Caesar-"

SHAKESPEARE (AND BURBAGE)

"Not to-"

BURBAGE / ANTONY

"Not to-"

(spins)

I know, dammit!

(back, smiles)

*"Not to praise him.**The evil that men do, lives after them**The good is oft' interred with their bones..."*

(pause, to Shakespeare)

"So...?"

SHAKESPEARE

"So... let... it... be..."

BURBAGE / ANTONY

"So let it be with Teasar!"

(Shakespeare groans)

Shit!

"Caesar!"

(gathers himself)

"Friends, Romans, Countrymen...

That's all I really wanted to say...

To you...

Today...

And so...

I take my leave!"

Burbage storms offstage.

BURBAGE

I told you I hadn't played Antony in a year! Here- you take the damn toga!

Tosses the toga to Shakespeare, who juggles it like a hot potato.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh no. No, no, no, no, no! You don't understand. I play small roles. You know... *small* roles. I don't do this. I don't. I'm no Marc Antony. Look at me. Look at me!

BURBAGE

Oh, come on, Bill- you know these lines.

SHAKESPEARE

(seriously)

It's not about the *lines*, Richard.

BURBAGE

That's it... Go!

He shoves Shakespeare out onto the "stage."

The MESSENGER enters...

MESSENGER

"Sir, Octavius is already come to Rome."

Shakespeare is a deer in the headlights.

MESSENGER (cont'd)

"SIR...? Octavius is already come to Rome!"

Frozen.

MESSENGER (cont'd)

"Perhaps I should go *get* him...

(beat)

Anon..."

The messenger gives up and exits.

Burbage approaches the frozen, spotlit figure in disbelief...

BURBAGE

I would never have believed it- even if he had told it to me himself! William Shakespeare had...

SHAKESPEARE

Stage fright.

BURBAGE

How astonishing!

SHAKESPEARE

How humiliating. After the show, I was waiting backstage, in terror. Not of the crowd, mind you, but of *him*. I heard him approach. The time had come. My ignominy would be complete!

They finally come face to face.

BURBAGE

I think I can clear up a minor misconception for you.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh?

BURBAGE

You're supposed to leave the *audience* speechless.

They laugh and start offstage.

SHAKESPEARE

So- we going for a drink?

BURBAGE

Nope.

SHAKESPEARE

We going for a meal?

BURBAGE

Nope.

SHAKESPEARE

Then, where are we going?

Burbage simply smiles.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

Oh no! I don't want to get *laid*. Are you crazy? Look at me- I couldn't *pay* someone to sleep with me.

BURBAGE

Sure you can. Follow me.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, I should really go home and write... something.

BURBAGE

You know, Shakespeare- they say the pen is mightier than the sword, and that just might very well be true, but I am quite sure there is one thing the pen is *not* mightier than, and whatever that thing is... you are about to come face to face with it.

He tosses Shakespeare through the door to the whorehouse.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

I hope he doesn't think I'm treating.

He follows.

Pastoral MUSIC. Sunrise...

THE WHOREHOUSE

Shakespeare emerges, light of soul, but heavy of body. His words are SEBASTIAN'S from Twelfth Night...

SHAKESPEARE / SEBASTIAN

*"This is the air, that is the glorious sun,
This pearl she gave me, I do feel't, and see't,
And though tis wonder that enwraps me thus-
Yet tis not madness...
Yet, doth this accident and flood of fortune
So far exceed all instance, all discourse
That I am ready to distrust mine eyes
And wrangle with my reason that persuades me
To any other trust but that I am mad!
Or else the lady's mad. There's something in't
That is deceivable. But, here the lady comes..."*

SARA CORAX (Older) emerges, dressed appropriately for her line of work. She smiles. Shakespeare smiles. She shows him his UNDERWEAR.

SARA

I think you forgot something.

SHAKESPEARE

(confused)

Huh. I could have sworn I... Then what am I wearing?

She smiles again. Shakespeare finally feels the "pinch" and rearranges whatever it is he is wearing.

SARA

Why don't you come back for these tomorrow?

SHAKESPEARE

Why don't I.

She starts back in.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

(points downwards)

But Sara- what about...?

SARA

Keep 'em.

She exits. Shakespeare "adjusts" himself and turns to the audience.

SHAKESPEARE

I had met this amazing woman. Sarah Corax. She did this thing with her... well, I really shouldn't talk about it. But... well... *WOW!* Not that I didn't already have a wife. I didn't. I mean I did, but I *didn't*. I had a certificate. I had an associate. An accountant with a wedding ring. I sent her paychecks. She sent me receipts. Enough said. Meanwhile, I threw myself into my work.

Shakespeare sits behind his desk, as the lights change...

SHAKESPEARE'S OFFICE

Shakespeare writing, possessed, as Burbage bursts in.

BURBAGE

Dammit Shakespeare!

(silence)

William?

Burbage watches him work. Notices a stray page on the desk. Picks it up.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

What's so damned interesting anyway? Just a lot of scribbling.

He reads, emotionless:

BURBAGE (cont'd)

"Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His cannon 'gainst self slaughter. O God..."

Burbage looks up, as Hamlet:

BURBAGE / HAMLET

"God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead- nay not so much: not two-
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr. So loving to my mother
That he might not betem the winds of Heavn'
Visit her face too roughly- Heaven and Earth
Must I remember: Why she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on; and yet within a month?
Let me not think on it- Frailty, thy name is woman-
Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married- O most wicked speed! To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good..."

Burbage returns to the text.

BURBAGE

"But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

(He looks up. Silence.)

Can you believe this? Can you believe I have to make this crap work? He never does a second draft, you know. He doesn't have to. People will be reading his *first* drafts four hundred years from now. I'll be "The First Hamlet"... or, "Shakespeare's Contemporary," that's me. You see- I've become the most eloquent parrot in London, but a parrot is a parrot, whether he says "To be or not to be," or "Polly want a cracker." So here I stand, with the sound of his scribbling pricking at my ears, and I can see, for perhaps the first time, the gulf that yawns between our talents. Now, you can call my acting whatever you want- exciting... boring, every person leaving the Globe will tell you something different. But *this*?

(holds up Hamlet)

There's no "different" in this. This is... *sublime*. I could act for a million years before a million people in a million different roles, but I would never achieve *this*.

(pause)

And yet, all is not lost. Granted, that Shakespeare's talent is unbounded, and mine is, well, on par with the most talented of lifeless marionettes... But you see, just as a marionette explodes to life when you tug on his strings, so do I explode into poetic grandeur the moment I step onto Shakespeare's stage. In those sweet, transient moments- I feel almost sacrilegious when I say this- but when I take the stage, and I speak these words... I *am* Shakespeare. I am sublime. So here I wait like a dog at his feet, hoping for a crumb, or a sonnet, or a soliloquy. He gives me *Hamlet*, and I paddle off onto the stage to ovation after ovation. They clap for the ventriloquist's dummy, and after the show, Shakespeare takes his hand out of my ass, and I go back into my box, with a painted grin on my face. Forever hoping to convince myself that it is *I* that think these thoughts. Forever failing.

He looks back at the script.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

(reading)

"But break my heart. For I must hold my tongue..."

(sighs)

Ah- it must be Heaven to write like that...

Shakespeare bolts to consciousness,
noticing Burbage is staring at him.

SHAKESPEARE

What? What do you want?

BURBAGE

Nothing. Aren't you finished yet?

SHAKESPEARE

(unenthusiastically)

As finished as I'll ever be. You're going to need all the help you can get to pull this off. Only one damn sword fight in the whole scene. Don't know *what* I was thinking.

(notices Burbage has a page)

Oh- you have the first soliloquy. What do you think?

BURBAGE

(long pause)

Pretty good, Shakespeare. Keep working on it.

He exits. Shakespeare fumes.

SHAKESPEARE

He can't *wait* for opening night. Opening night, when Hamlet is born, and I sit there sulking in Row G Seat 12. Actually in Hamlet, I wrote myself a small role. Played the Ghost. A real stretch for me, right?

I walk the stage as a shadow, imploring Hamlet: ... "Adieu, adieu, adieu. *Remember me.*" Later, under the stage, I speak again. Among moth eaten costumes, and rusty nails, I call up between the boards, pleading: ... "Remember me." "*Remember me.*" Well, that's what we all really want, isn't it? To be remembered. And I won't be. My writing might survive. Dead words on a page. Ink. That will be my legacy. Without a pen, I'm nothing.

Sound: The Audience applauds.
Shakespeare takes a seat in the audience. Burbage enters as Hamlet.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

Without *him*, I'm nothing. They clap for his before he even speaks a word.

BURBAGE / HAMLET

*"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew--"*

Shakespeare leaps from his seat.

SHAKESPEARE / HAMLET

*"O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit?
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peek
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing.
Am I a coward?"*

(sighs)

*"Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I-
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab."*

He regains his seat, and his composure.

SHAKESPEARE

He'll be speaking that speech later on in Act Two, Scene Two. I write the lines, he takes the bows. And he'll be remembered. Believe me. (Pause) I'll tell you a little secret, if you promise not to tell. Almost every leading role I wrote, from Romeo to Richard the Third, I wrote for *myself* to perform. Those are *my* words. *My* thoughts...

BURBAGE / HAMLET

"To be, or not to be, that is the question."

SHAKESPEARE

Good question! What *is* it in me? What prevents me from leaping up onto that stage? Today, cowering among the groundlings at the feet of Richard Burbage, I finally have my answer. Now, I know I can act, and act well, but what I'm watching, what I am both blessed and cursed to be watching, I'm just not sure I can *do* that. In fact, if I'm honest- I know full well I will *never* do that. This isn't merely having an audience in the palm of his hand- this is inviting an audience into the expanse of his *mind*. Ah... it must be Heaven to act like that. Something I will never know, of course... because I am a coward.

"Hamlet" unfreezes, and speaks directly to Shakespeare, who by this time has joined him "onstage."

BURBAGE / HAMLET

*"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry...
And lose the name of action."*

Burbage leaves.

Shakespeare, alone with his thoughts.

BEN JONSON approaches.

SHAKESPEARE

I know, Jonson- I stole the whole damn thing from The Revenger's Tragedy. Still want to put your name on my scripts?

JONSON

(seriously)

I wouldn't *dare*.

SHAKESPEARE

I thought not. Enjoy the show.

JONSON

I couldn't. Too busy being jealous.

SHAKESPEARE

I know- he is *something*, isn't he?

JONSON

Who?

SHAKESPEARE

Burbage. He is really something.

JONSON

Was he? I didn't notice.

SHAKESPEARE

You didn't? What play were you watching?

JONSON

Your play, William. I was watching *your* play.

SHAKESPEARE

Then how the devil did you miss him?

JONSON

(astonished)

You really don't *know*, do you? You're a curious little fellow, William Shakespeare. "What a piece of work is man" ... is *right*.

Jonson leaves with a sad smile.

Burbage emerges from "backstage."

BURBAGE

If you tell me to "keep working on it," I'll beat the iambic pentameter out of you.

SHAKESPEARE

Pretty good, Burbage.

BURBAGE

Good enough. Come on- we better get over to the Porpentine before Hemmings drinks all the beer.

SHAKESPEARE

Listen, Burbage... *Richard*... I know it's opening-

BURBAGE

Yes, it is. It is opening. And on the night of an opening, you and I go-

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, I know. I know, Richard. And I'm sorry, but, I promised-

BURBAGE

Yes. You promised *me*, remember? We opened a show today. It bombs, I buy; it sails, you buy. So...

Shakespeare removes a few COINS and hands them to Burbage.

SHAKESPEARE

Here.

BURBAGE

What's this?

SHAKESPEARE

Money.

BURBAGE

Thank you. What's this? The point is that we drink together. You know, like frien-... you know, associates.

SHAKESPEARE

I'm sorry. I promised Sara I'd-

BURBAGE

Sara? Sara Corax Sara? Sara "House of Ill Repute" Sara?

SARA CORAX enters.

SARA

Sara "I Worship The Ground You Walk On, William" Sara.

She saunters up to the men.

SARA (cont'd)

I don't think we've met. Dicky, right?

BURBAGE

Dick.

SARA

Dick.

BURBAGE

Richard.

SARA

Whatever.

She offers him her hand to kiss.

BURBAGE

(declining)

I'm sorry, I can't. And it's *not* because I don't know where it's been.

SHAKESPEARE

(squeezing between them)

Sara- could you please wait for me outside?

SARA

Of course, Will.

(kisses him, playing to Burbage)

SARA(cont'd)

Congratulations, darling. Once Dicky gets over his opening day jitters, you'll have a wonderful show.

(to Burbage)

Charmed.

Burbage eyes Shakespeare.

BURBAGE

Well *one* of us is.

She leaves. The two men look at each other for a long moment.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

I don't think I'm taking this very well.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard, please understand- I never thought I could leave, you know... *this*. I didn't think there was anything else. But now...?

BURBAGE

Now...? What? Wait- what are you saying? What *exactly* are you saying?

SHAKESPEARE

I don't know. I'm not getting any younger, I'm not getting better, and I'm certainly not getting any happier...

BURBAGE

And...?

SHAKESPEARE

And... I don't know. Like I told you. I don't *know*.

BURBAGE

Huh.

(pause)

Well.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I should really-

BURBAGE

I understand. Nature Calls.

SHAKESPEARE

No, my *Future* Calls. Big difference.

He exits.

Burbage spins angrily on the audience.

BURBAGE

Oh, he is such a *wit*. Isn't he? He is so witty. Off to dazzle his woman with his witty... *witticisms*. He keeps her away from me. Like I'm contagious, or something. Not that I want to sleep with the both of them. I do not. Just because you dream about something, and very occasionally at that, it doesn't necessarily mean that you want that thing. You people, you're so lucky- you have Freud and Jung, and Woody Allen. We had the Bible. Good luck reading through Revelations to find out why you wanted to kill your father and sleep with your mother.

The GHOST OF EDWARD ALLEYN enters.

ALLEYN/ HAMLET'S GHOST

*"Mark me- My hour is almost come
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself. List, list O list!"*
--Oh! I would have been so good at that!

BURBAGE

Mr. Alleyn?

ALLEYN

Edward, please.

BURBAGE

Edward, then. How are you?

ALLEYN

Dead, actually.

(Burbage retreats)

Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you, dear boy, but I *am* dead.

BURBAGE

I'm terribly sorry- I didn't know.

ALLEYN

That's alright. I didn't know it myself until about fifteen minutes ago.

BURBAGE

How terrible.

ALLEYN

Oh, it isn't really much of a surprise. I've been dying for quite some time now.

BURBAGE

Disease?

ALLEYN

'Course not, dear boy. It takes a great deal more than a few pesky microbes to bring down "The Greatest Actor of our Time!"

Alleyn sadly sits beside Burbage.

ALLEYN

No, Richard... *words*.

BURBAGE

Words?

ALLEYN

Words! I lost them, Richard. Marlowe had the nerve to die on me; Shakespeare had the nerve to ignore me; Jonson... well, talk about *nerve*, those aren't words, they're instruments of torture.

(sighs)

No *words*, Richard. When you lose the words, you lose the Art- and when you lose the Art, believe me, the body soon follows.

BURBAGE

"I need no spirit come from beyond the grave to tell me that."

ALLEYN

Don't tease me. I am a ghost, you know. Fifteen minutes and I've already perfected possession, levitation, and how to spin my head around like a top. If only I'd had that one in "Faustus." Can you imagine the *reviews*?

BURBAGE

Is that it, then? You're here to haunt me?

ALLEYN

Well, to be perfectly frank, that was my intention, but now that I'm here, you seem to have beaten me to it. Richard, listen to me, this pain you're in- it isn't about Sara. It's about *Shakespeare*. If he leaves, the clock strikes Midnight, and your resplendent career turns back into a pumpkin.

BURBAGE

My God- I think you're right.

ALLEYN

I'm a spirit from beyond the grave, Richard. We're *always* right.

With a wink, he starts off.

BURBAGE

Mr... Edward?

ALLEYN

Yes?

BURBAGE

What's it...

(looks out into the darkness)

What's it *like*?

ALLEYN

(takes a moment)

When you're on the stage, do you ever get the feeling that nothing could ever be more blissful?

BURBAGE

Yes.

ALLEYN

Nothing *will*.

(pause)

Don't lose those *words*, Richard.

He walks to the edge of the stage and turns back one last time.

ALLEYN (cont'd)

"Remember me."

He exits, Burbage gazes after...

Lights change. We are in...

SHAKESPEARE'S OFFICE

Shakespeare thrusts a SCRIPT into Burbage's hand.

SHAKESPEARE

Take that, Richard Burbage.

BURBAGE

(reads)

"Othello?"

SHAKESPEARE

"The Moor of Venice."

BURBAGE

Who am I?

SHAKESPEARE

The Moor of Venice.

BURBAGE

So far so good.

He sits, thumbing through the script.

SHAKESPEARE

Othello's confidante Iago devises a story to make him jealous of his wife.

BURBAGE

And...?

SHAKESPEARE

Two acts later, he strangles her and kills himself.

BURBAGE

(pause)

He... *strangles his wife*, huh?

SHAKESPEARE

That's right.

BURBAGE

And all it takes is a little innuendo?

SHAKESPEARE

You've been jealous before, Richard. That's all it ever takes.

BURBAGE

That's true. That's very, very true.

He spots SARA in the distance.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

Say- isn't that...?

SHAKESPEARE

Sara.

BURBAGE

Yeah.

SHAKESPEARE

That's odd. She must be here to surprise me.

BURBAGE

Of course. She must be.

(beat)

Look at that. She's over there talking to Henry Condell. I tell you, if I had a sovereign for every woman he's... well, I'd have a *lot* of money.

SHAKESPEARE

Really? I didn't know-

BURBAGE

Henry!... Hey, where're they going?

Lights change, into...

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Ha! I like not that."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"What dost thou say, Iago?"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Nothing my lord, or if- I know not what."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it,
That he would steal away so guilty like,
Seeing your coming."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"I do believe twas he."

BURBAGE / IAGO

"My noble lord-"

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"What dost thou say, Iago?"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,
Know of your love?"

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"O yes, and went between us very oft."

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Indeed?"

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern thou aught in that?"
Is he not honest?"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Honest, my lord?"

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"Honest? Ay, honest."

BURBAGE / IAGO

"My lord, for aught I know."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"What dost thou think?"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Think, my lord?"

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"Think my lord? By heaven, thou echo'st me,
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown. By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts!"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"O, beware, my lord of jealousy!
It is the green eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"Why? Why is this?
Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy?"

BURBAGE / IAGO

"My lord, I see you are moved."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"No, not much moved.
I do not think but Desdemona's honest."

BURBAGE / IAGO

"Long live she so! And long live your grace to think so."

SHAKESPEARE / OTHELLO

"If more thou dost perceive, let me know more."

BURBAGE / IAGO

"My lord. I take my leave."

Burbage starts off. Lights shift back.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard. Thank you.

BURBAGE

(displays script)

Thank you.

He exits.

SHAKESPEARE

I do not believe in fate, no matter what the English teachers say to you about me, but I can no longer deny this simple sober fact: There will be no way out for me. I am cursed to remain in the theater forever. Unhappy. Unrecognized. Confined in this Wooden O. But, I am a *professional*, am I not? And as a *professional*, I am determined to put this matter completely out of my head. Just watch me- my next play will have absolutely *nothing* to do with women or infidelity...

Shakespeare exits, brandishing a new
SCRIPT. Burbage passes, snatching the
script. He reads from CYMBELINE:

BURBAGE

*"There's no motion that tends to vice in man, but I affirm
It is the woman's part.
Ambitions, covetings, changes of pride,
Disdain, nice longing, slanders, mutability;
All faults that name, nay, that Hell knows, why, hers
In part, or all: or rather all."*

He looks up at the audience.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

Well, I've done a fine job, haven't I? I have doomed myself to
an eternity of playing jealous misogynist psychotics. Not that
it's some tremendous acting stretch, I am a jealous misogynist
psychotic, but- and I'm sure you can understand- the last person
I want to portray on the stage is *myself*.

Shakespeare bursts in.

SHAKESPEARE

She's blackmailing me!

BURBAGE

What?

SHAKESPEARE

Sara Corax! She's blackmailing me! If I don't pay up, she
talks. To everyone! My wife, the Privy Council, the Master
of the Revels... No more plays!

BURBAGE

(realizing)

No more *parts*.

SHAKESPEARE

No more Shakespeare! I'll be thrown in jail!

He goes for the door.

BURBAGE

Where are you going?

SHAKESPEARE

To pack.

BURBAGE

For what?

SHAKESPEARE

For *prison*. I don't have the money she's asking for.

BURBAGE

I do.

Shakespeare halts.

SHAKESPEARE

What?

BURBAGE

I have the money.

SHAKESPEARE

I'm sure you have money, but you don't have *this* money.
(beat)

Do you?

Burbage goes to a trunk, opens it,
rustles beneath a costume or two and
emerges with a bag of MONEY.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

You would never *tell* anyone... about this? Hold it over my
head- would you?

BURBAGE

What do you mean- you mean, like... *Blackmail* you?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes.

BURBAGE

No. Of course not. I don't think so.

SHAKESPEARE

I see. Well.

Shakespeare exits, passing SARA. Gives
her the money.

SARA

I thought you didn't have it.

SHAKESPEARE

I didn't.

Sara storms into the office and flings
the bag at Burbage's feet.

SARA

What the hell is *that*?

BURBAGE

Your blackmail money. Don't you want it?

SARA

I want *his* money.

BURBAGE

He doesn't have any.

SARA

I know. That is the point, Richard.

BURBAGE

Money is the point, Sara. You want it? There it is. Now take it and slither off to wherever it is you wish to go.

He kicks the bag back at her.

SARA

Money? You think this is about *metal*, Richard?

(moving closer)

Why didn't you tell him about us?

BURBAGE

Tell him what?

SARA

Oh, that's very good. "Tell him what?" That's very clever.

BURBAGE

That was a long time ago, Sara. We ended that.

SARA

No, Richard- you ended that.

BURBAGE

Oh yes- you must have been destroyed, Sara. It took you... what-two whole weeks before you slid into the sheets with Shakespeare!

SARA

You *brought* him to me, you bastard! You treated me like a whore.

BURBAGE

Sara... You are a whore.

SARA

(pause)

I wasn't always, Richard.

(beat)

Do you remember the night we first met?

BURBAGE

I was there, Sara. I think I'd remember it.

SARA

You'd think you would. But you don't. You never did.

BURBAGE

I remember it perfectly-

SARA

You didn't meet me as a whore! You met me as a *girl*. *Richard the Third*. Remember? That's where I met Shakespeare too, but you two were too busy with each other that night to notice me. I was just your first opening night orgasm. Your first nameless face.

BURBAGE

(shocked)

I *remember*. I remember you. Why didn't you tell me?

SARA

Tell you *what*, Richard? Would it have *mattered*? I loved you, and you loved Shakespeare, and I *knew* it. Well, I refuse to be an *aspect* of your relationship with William Shakespeare any longer.

She tosses the money bag back at his feet.

SARA (cont'd)

There is your money. I don't want it... and even if I did, I wouldn't take it. I'd rather go back to being a whore, where at least the men see me underneath them.

She goes to him and places the money back in his hand.

SARA (cont'd)

I'll tell you something, Richard Burbage- you leave a lot to be desired when you're *off* a stage. But when you're *on* one... you're the closest thing to Divinity I may ever see.

She places her hand softly on his cheek, and he turns away.

SARA (cont'd)

Don't worry, Richard. You've weathered me, just as you'll weather others, just as you've weathered them before... But "*The rain, it raineth every day.*" Some day, Richard, you won't weather it.

(pause)

Some day, Richard Burbage, there will only be you.

She lingers, almost sorry for him, before she turns and leaves. Burbage stands in the middle of the room, lost. He sits behind Shakespeare's desk, and picking up a manuscript, begins to read. Slowly, as always, it engrosses him...

BLACKOUT. MUSIC, as top of show...

SHAKESPEARE'S OFFICE

Lights up. SHAKESPEARE at his desk, writing and, by the look of his frustration, not writing well...

SHAKESPEARE

Dammit!

He violently scratches something out. Tries another line.

SHAKESPEARE

Dammit!

One more, even worse, but before he can curse, the door is hurled open...

BURBAGE

Dammit, Shakespeare!

BURBAGE stands in the doorway, holding a rolled up script tightly in his fist. He slams the door behind him and dramatically brandishes the script.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

Do you know what this is?

SHAKESPEARE

No, Richard. I do not.

BURBAGE

It's a copy of your next script. I've just read it.

SHAKESPEARE

Well. What do you think?

BURBAGE

I think... I think we've already said this.

SHAKESPEARE

(beat)

I think you're right.

BURBAGE

... And that leaves us where?

Shakespeare makes his decision:

SHAKESPEARE

The first performance of the Tempest.

Shakespeare crosses to a trunk behind
his desk and removes Prospero's cloak.

BURBAGE

I don't wish to upset you, Shakespeare, but you don't seem to be listening to me. I don't *want* to say these lines on the stage, I don't *have* to say these lines on the stage, and I'm not *going* to say these lines on the stage. In fact, I'm not leaving your office.

Burbage sits defiantly.

SHAKESPEARE

As you wish.

He tosses the cloak to Burbage.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

If I can't bring you to the play, I'll bring the play to you!

(as Lear:)

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!"

A tempestuous noise of thunder and
lightning. Blackout.

THE TEMPEST

Lights up on the wispy, dreamlike world
of the play. Prospero (Burbage) stands
firm before Ariel (Shakespeare).

BURBAGE / PROSPERO

"Well, Ariel- what is't thou can'st demand?"

SHAKESPEARE / ARIEL

"My liberty."

BURBAGE / PROSPERO

*"Dost thou forget
From what a torment I did free thee?
Hast thou forgot the foul witch... Sycorax?"*

SHAKESPEARE / ARIEL

"No, sir."

Burbage removes Prospero's cloak,
letting it fall to the stage.

BURBAGE

I will say no more. I will not speak these lies.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard- pick up that cloak.

BURBAGE

I will not.

SHAKESPEARE

I say pick it up!

BURBAGE

I did not blackmail you.

SHAKESPEARE

Then why would I stay?

BURBAGE

I don't know! Why don't you tell me!

SHAKESPEARE

I stayed because you *blackmailed* me!!! And you blackmailed me because you *detest* me! And you have every right to detest me, because I have given you nothing but grounds to despise me!

Burbage stares at him, floored.

BURBAGE

Despise you? You gave me *life*, William. With the slightest flick of your pen, you made me a prince, and a lover, and a coward, and a king. And I hated you for that.

(pause)

And I *worshipped* you for that. I have lied to you, I have frustrated you, I have betrayed you, and I am sorry. But I never blackmailed you.

Silence. Shakespeare sighs, beaten.

SHAKESPEARE

I know. I'm sorry, Richard. Blackmail is an ugly thing, but it's always been easier to stomach than the truth. I've stayed- I've *had* to stay- to watch you finish my sentences, not with a period, but with a sigh... or a shriek. The fact is, Richard, any idiot can toss a few words onto a page. But when you speak my words, I am no longer an idiot. I am a *genius*.

He picks up a script off the desk.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

These words may be mine, Richard- these inkblots, these scratches... but the voice they hear is yours. I'm tired of fighting, Richard. If I won't be remembered, I need to be forgotten. Let me go.

He picks up the CLOAK. Burbage stares at it, and finally, speaks...

BURBAGE / PROSPERO

"I shall miss thee, Ariel."

SHAKESPEARE

Yes. Use the words.

He gently drapes the cloak around Burbage's shoulders.

SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

(soothing him)

"Be not afraid..."

BURBAGE / PROSPERO

*"Be not afraid...
Our revels now are ended...
These our actors
Were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision..."*

SHAKESPEARE / ARIEL

"The solemn temples, the great Globe itself..."

BURBAGE / PROSPERO

*"Yea, all which it inherits shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind.
We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep....
My Ariel?"*

Burbage brings Shakespeare to the very lip of the stage.

BURBAGE / PROSPERO (cont'd)

*"Come hither spirit, this is thy charge.
To the elements!
Be free. And fare you well."*

Shakespeare takes a last look at the theater, a last look at Burbage, and exits into the audience...

And stops.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard?

BURBAGE

Yes?

SHAKESPEARE

(turns)

I wonder what it feels like- to be *obscure*?

BURBAGE

I guess we'll find out, won't we?

Shakespeare nods, turns to face the Unknown, and disappears.

The lights converge on Burbage, alone.

BURBAGE (cont'd)

When Shakespeare left London, he took my career with him, and when he died, he took what I liked best about myself to the grave with him. In London, he has already been forgotten. There are new writers, new theaters, new companies. As for myself, I can sadly say that I remain "The Greatest Actor of Our Time!" Ben Jonson has declared that he wants to write my epitaph. Jonson can scribble all he wants, I know that obscurity waits patiently for me on the other side. Today, on my death day, I can honestly say that I will not miss the stage. A stage is just boards. Paint, nails... but the *words*... I shall miss his *words*. As this world seems to get fainter and fainter, and the shadows loom larger and larger, I have a curious feeling that I just might get my wish after all. I'll be *remembered*. I will. I'll be "Richard Burbage, the First Hamlet."

(he smiles)

There could be no greater epitaph. The rest is... *Silence*.

In silence, Richard Burbage looks up into the lone spotlight, which slowly-

But inevitably-

Fades...

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY