

F.S. 1

ACT ONE

[*The pre-show music, the 'Jupiter' section of Gustav Holz's 'The Planets,' reaches its crashing climax. Lights come up on the stage. The set consists of a low-budget representation of an Elizabethan theater in the fashion of Shakespeare's Globe, with four escapes, upstage right and left, and downstage right and left. There is a wooden bookstand center right, which prominently features a book: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. After a beat, DANIEL enters from the wings, ostensibly a house manager. He wears a watch.*] Side 1

DANIEL [Rather serious.] Hello, and welcome to this performance of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*. I have just a few brief announcements before we get underway. The use of flash photography and the recording of this performance by any means, audio or video, is strictly prohibited. If you have a mobile phone, please take a moment now to turn it off, and if you have a pager—you need to get yourself a mobile phone.

For your convenience, toilets are located in the bathroom. Also, please take a moment now to locate the exit nearest your seat. [*Points to exits, in the manner of an airline flight attendant.*] Should the theater experience a sudden loss of pressure, oxygen masks [*Pulls one from his jacket pocket.*] will drop automatically. Simply place the mask over your nose and mouth, and continue to breathe normally. If you are at the theater with a small child, please place your own mask on first, and let the little bugger fend for himself.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Daniel Singer, and it gives me great pleasure to announce that we are about to attempt a feat that we believe to be unprecedented in the history of civilization. That is, to capture, in a single theatrical experience, the magic, the genius, the towering grandeur of

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. [*Lifts up the mighty book.*] Now we only have an hour and a half and this book weighs about . . . [*Considers.*] six pounds, which means we have to get through eight ounces every . . . [*Calculates on his watch.*] seven seconds. That's like . . . [*Calculates again.*] two six-packs a minute. So we'd better start drinking! And no one knows more about Shakespeare and alcohol than the gentleman I'm about to introduce. One of the world's preeminent Shakespearean scholars, he has a Certificate of Completion from *preeminentshakespeareanscholar.com*. He is here tonight to provide *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* with a much-needed preface. Please welcome me in joining Mr. Jess Winfield.

[JESS enters in a tweedy suit and spectacles. He shakes hands with DANIEL, who hands him the book and steps far stage left to listen.]

JESS Thank you, Daniel, and greetings, ladies and gentlemen. [*Hugging the Complete Works book adoringly, he begins professorially, as if lecturing a class of students.*] William Shakespeare: playwright, poet, actor; Stratford's proudest flower, transplanted from the heart of the English countryside to bask in the warmth of London's literary greenhouse. A man who, despite the ravages of male pattern baldness, planted the potent seed of his poetical genius in the fertile womb of Elizabeth's England. There it took root and spread through the lymphatic system of Western civilization, until it became the oozing carbuncle of knowledge and understanding that grows even today on the very tip of our collective consciousness. And yet how much do we intellectually flaccid members of the twenty-first century appreciate the plump fruit of Shakespeare's productive loins?

DANIEL How much?

JESS Let's find out, shall we? [*To the light booth.*] Bob . . . may I have the house lights, please?

[*The house lights come up.*]

Now, you are a theater-going crowd, obviously of above-average literary sensibility, and yet, if I may just have a brief show of hands, how many of you have ever seen or read any play by William Shakespeare? Any contact with the Bard whatsoever, just raise your hands . . . [*Almost everyone raises a hand.*]

[JESS rushes to DANIEL in a panic.]

JESS Dude, we're screwed.

DANIEL Why?

JESS I think they know more than we do.

DANIEL But you're an eminent Shakespearean scholar!

JESS No, I'm *pre*-eminent.

DANIEL [*Somewhat lost.*] Okay . . . then, be preeminent.

JESS Yes. [*Regaining his confidence, JESS comes back downstage. To audience.*] All right. How many of you have ever seen or read *All's Well That Ends Well*?

[*Perhaps a third of the audience raises their hands. JESS turns to DANIEL and they exchange a thumbs-up.*]

Let's see if we can find out if we have any *super*-eminent Shakespearean scholars here tonight. Has anybody ever seen or read *King John*? *King John*, anyone?

[ADAM, in street garb, raises his hand in the third row. JESS briefly acknowledges two people with raised hands. NOTE: if ADAM is the only responder, JESS may just ask, 'You have, really? Have you seen it, or read it?' below.]

Seen it, or read it? [*They respond.*] Good. Seen it, read it? [*They respond.*] Good. [*He spots ADAM.*] What about you? Seen it, read it?

ADAM Well, I downloaded it.

JESS Hm. Would you mind telling us what it's about?

ADAM Um, it's about a hunchback . . . ?

JESS [*Mildly disgusted.*] No, *King John* is not about a hunchback. As any preeminent Shakespearean scholar can tell you, *King John* is about a king named John. Would you stand up, please? [ADAM *rises.*] Ladies and gentlemen, *ecce homo*.

ADAM [*Offended.*] Hey!

JESS Judging by your obvious lack of fluency in Latin, may I presume that you have not matriculated?

ADAM Well, not today.

JESS Look at this man, ladies and gentlemen: abandoned by our educational system, awash in a sea of sexual ambiguity, hopped up on empty kilobytes of virtual Viagra. And now look at the person sitting next to you. Go ahead! Look at them! Do you recognize the same vapid expression? The same pores, clogged with the acne of intellectual immaturity? Or do you perhaps see—KEEP LOOKING!—do you see there a longing, a desperate plea for literary salvation?

ADAM Can I sit down?

JESS No! You stand there before us as a living symbol of a society whose capacity to comprehend, much less attain, the genius of a William Shakespeare has been systematically sodomized by soap operas, reamed by reality shows, and violently violated by the women of *The View*!

[JESS *gestures to ADAM to sit down.*]

Ladies and gentlemen, I say to you, cast off the cheap thrill of the car chase for the splendor of the sonnet! Exchange the isolation of the iPod for the gentle idylls of the iamb! Imagine a world where manly men wear pink tights with pride!

DANIEL Hallelujah!

JESS A brave new world, where this book [*Indicating the Complete Works.*] will be found in every hotel room in the world! Can I get an 'amen?'

DANIEL Amen!

JESS This is my dream, ladies and gentlemen, and it begins here, tonight. Join us on this, our holy quest, this Shakespearean jihad. Can I get an 'amen?' [*Off audience reaction.*] Thank you, Jesus! Now on with the show and may the Bard be with you! [*The house lights fade as DANIEL shakes JESS's hand. JESS returns the book to DANIEL and exits.*]

DANIEL [*Putting the book back on the bookstand.*] Those of you who own a copy of this book know that no collection is complete without a brief biography of the life of William Shakespeare. Providing this portion of the show will be the third member of the troupe; please welcome to the stage Mr. Adam Long.

[*ADAM comes to the stage, carrying a mobile phone.*]

ADAM Hi. I was Googling Shakespeare, and I found some amazing stuff. [*He begins reading from the phone. Each time he pages to a new screen there is an audible 'beep.'*] William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, War-wick-shire. [*Beep.*] The third of eight children, he was the eldest son of John Shakespeare, a locally prominent merchant, and Mary Arden, daughter of a Roman. [*Beep.*] Catholic member of the landed gentry. In 1582 he married a farmer's daughter named Anne Hathaway.

[*ADAM is confused and looks to DANIEL.*]

DANIEL Different Anne Hathaway.

ADAM That's a shame. [*Beep.*] Shakespeare arrived in London in 1588. [*Beep.*] There he dictated to his secretary, Rudolf Hess, the work *Mein Kampf*, in which he set forth his program for the restoration of Germany to a dominant position in Europe. After reoccupying the Rhineland zone between France and Germany, and annexing Austria, the Sudetenland, and the remainder of Czechoslovakia, [*Beep.*] Shakespeare invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, thus precipitating World War II. [*To DANIEL.*] I never knew that before. [*DANIEL gestures to him to wrap it up. ADAM reads rapidly.*] Shakespeare remained in Berlin when the Russians entered the city, and committed suicide with his mistress, Eva Peron. He lies buried in the church at Stratford, [*Beep.*] though his head is frozen in a holding tank in Glendale, California. Thank you.

[*ADAM bows. DANIEL shakes his hand and hurries him offstage.*]

DANIEL Now, without further ado, we are proud to present *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*!

[*Blackout. A pretentious, heavy-metal version of 'Greensleeves' crashes through the sound system. At its conclusion, lights come up to reveal JESS, in Shakespearean attire and high-top sneakers. JESS consults the book, realizes it's upside down, turns it over, flips a page, and reads.*]

JESS "All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts."

How many parts, exactly, must one man play? According to my computations, there are one thousand one hundred twenty-two roles in Shakespeare's works. Way too many.

role
ends

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