GRESHAM COLLEGE

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SHAKESPEARE'S STAGES: IN LITTLE PLACE A MILLION

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is March 3rd 1592 and a pleasant enough afternoon to go to the playhouse. At the new Rose Theatre in Southwark, in the Liberty Clink, the prices to stand aren't high; there are balconies as well where you can sit, but they cost three pence, three times as expensive as standing in the pit, which is paved with cinders and ash and impacted hazelnut shells left by previous audiences. There's a new play on today, presented by the Lord Strange's Men, written not by one of our London playwrights but by a young out-of-towner who's causing something of a stir. It's called Hary the VJ but people who've seen it are calling it Henry VI. It deals with those events that are still in all our family histories, that terrible Civil War in which the Lancastrians wore their red roses and the Yorkists their white. It's painful to recall, rather as if people in 2018, say, might watch a play about the end of the First World War.

Violence sweeps across the stage in a vicious tide. The two armies roar and curse at each other, threaten, clash and murder. But suddenly the strangest thing happens. The unassuming figure of the King of England sits down on a molehill. He is a quiet and gentle man, taking no part in the fighting at all. He quietly tells us he longs to be a homely swain, a shepherd tending his flock:

> What a life were this
> How sweet, how lovely…

Suddenly another man arrives from the battle, dragging the corpse of a younger man. He's very pleased with himself for having killed this soldier of the enemy side, till he looks more closely at the face and sees that it is that of his own son. This was truly a War that split families (it's as if a Brexiter had killed a member of his family who voted Remain}.

Then a young man comes on with the dead body of an older man and the equivalent happens – he is a son who has accidentally killed his own father. The air is filled with the two men's lamentation and the king's sorrow for them – all three are on the ground, a triptych of grief; they never address each other, but their voices make the saddest music that momentarily silences the sounds of war. Hary the VJ, heroic and rhetorical till now, has suddenly become heart-breaking.

And now we see the Duke of York, also on a molehill. He stands holding a blood- stained handkerchief with a paper crown on his head. This humiliation has been inflicted on him by the Lancastrian Queen, a Frenchwoman who is like Boadicea, as a preparation for killing him, as she has killed his youngest son, who was little more than a boy. York too is inconsolable:

> See ruthless Queen a hapless father's tears
> This cloth thou dip'st in blood of my sweet boy
> And I with tears do wash the blood away.

And then she kills him too.

Now another sound gently insinuates itself. One of York's three surviving sons is left alone with us, making our acquaintance with a certain civility:

> I have no brother. I am like no brother
> And this word Love which greybeards call divine
> Be resident in men like one another
> And not in me
> I am myself alone…

He whispers to us that he will stop at nothing in usurping the crown of England for himself as Richard III. He seems to be speaking on behalf of every transgressor who has their secret longings, whether they be characters in the play, or we in the audience.

The Rose Theatre, where Hary the VJ premiered so spectacularly, was finally excavated in 1989. Thanks to the filibustering of a small army of theatre practitioners, community groups and right-minded MPs, its rather scanty remains were saved from developers about to flatten the site to make an office block. In fact, as such disputes go, this was a remarkably genial affair, and it created great photo opportunities. Famous actors lay down in the path of slowly approaching tractors (to the great amusement of their drivers), Leslie Grantham of Eastenders pleaded on behalf of Shakespearian stage history, and Dame Peggy Ashcroft presided over the theatre's skeletal remains in a great Shakespearian throne like King Canute (except that she did manage to stop the waves). Shakespearian pulses quickened, the developers were thoroughly reasonable, and the modest national interest in Elizabethan theatre practice surged a little.

It turned out that in its time (it had opened in 1587) the Rose, standing just outside the city limits (to avoid the city fathers on the alert for disguised brothels) was only the fourth significant theatre to be built in London. It was preceded by a playhouse in Newington Butts and the Curtain, and the very first, simply called The Theatre (as so far there was no other). Now that we have unearthed a few facts, the imagery of the Rose – its timber and thatch, its upstage balcony for onlookers within the play, the slightly strange stage which had a lateral bulge between its upstage and downstage areas, which then tapered to point as directly as an accusing arrow at the audience ahead of it – all make you realise how electric the limping approach of the future Richard III must have been.

The odds and ends left in the courtyard – jewellery, rings and so on - are now here in the Museum of London. Most fascinating of all, the theatre held two thousand people even though the courtyard in which the stage sat - not just the stage but the surrounding courtyard – was only twelve metres across (no Health and Safety Regulations then). And yet it could sustain the epic sweep of the Wars of the Roses and the intimacy of its Henry VI on his molehill and the Duke of York's agony. And for all there is so little to see now, the Rose, with its singular combination of congestion and distance (those who had paid the most banished to the furthest seats and the cheaper standing at the front, in an exact opposite of modern practice) provides a muskily enticing hint of London in the 1590s. It was a model for all that followed.

Not that Shakespeare was to hang around here for long - this was much more the patch of Christopher Marlowe and perhaps Thomas Kyd and Ben Jonson as well.

As a 28-year old he had only recently shaken himself free of the limitations of Stratford – his father's bankruptcy, his perhaps shotgun marriage to Anne Hathaway, their three children – and had then perhaps spent his so-called Lost Years learning his trade acting in a touring company such as the itinerant Queen's Men, in terrible old warhorses with suspiciously familiar titles – The Taming of a Shrew, The Famous Victories of Henry V - a life described by Ben Jonson as "going with shoes full of gravel behind a blind jade and hamper to stalk upon boards and barrelheads to an old cracked trumpet". If so he may have been the unpopular company member who is always complaining about the script, and becoming an instinctive reviser of terrible old plays for his own purposes.

In London he saw his chance. He immediately gravitated to the theatre district of Shoreditch when he arrived, much as Italians would one day head for New York's Little Italy, and the presence of Christopher Marlowe and the young Richard Burbage and so many working playhouses must have sent his mind racing. The city was in the

grip of theatre- building – and since he had never seen a purpose-built theatre as such, he must have been fascinated. The Rose, the Theatre and the rest all had much the same design: a polygonal shape with a courtyard within it open to the sky, a stage sticking into the courtyard like a tongue. It was thus an amphitheatre with audience on three sides and a stack of balconies looking down at the stage – which was truly suspended between Heaven and Hell, the roof (there to keep the rain off) being known by everyone as the heavens, and the beneath-stage, reached through a trap door, as the Hell; so all plays, be they tragical, comical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, reflected man's position in the universe.

When Shakespeare came to write Henry V years later he has his Chorus insist that since a single figure could "attest in little place a million" we must on our "imaginary forces work" in the absence of scenery and a big company. And this simplicity was to be Shakespeare's calling card, despite the fact there were always gallons of pig's blood standing by to make the battle scenes graphic and the actors wore clothes cast off by sympathetic noblemen. So as he became a playwright famous for his word-pictures he also had to spend many long hours with his colleagues early in the morning in practical negotiations with Edmund Tilney, Master of the Revels, as to what bits of furniture and "flats" of forest glades could be approved for today's show, as well as having each new text analysed by him for impropriety, before rushing off to play what we would call a matinee.

But it may have dawned on him that there was a more prestigious venue for him than the Rose, and that surely was the older Theatre. As a gift in parting to the Rose he seems to have premiered, after the three parts of Henry VI, that blood-bolstered black sheep of the canon Titus Andronicus. Significantly, for all their violence, all four Rose plays feature some of the most electric writing he ever did and some ravishing poetry. There is an entertaining print of an actor playing Titus in doublet and hose with a Roman toga over it, which should (but doesn't) settle all our current arguments in advance as to whether the plays should be done in the costumes of the original period or updated to the present. Apart from its violence and unexpected lyricism, Titus also shows that Shakespeare liked a silly joke as well as he did the deeper delights of comedy, and he isn't afraid to break up his metre for it. At one point Titus's brother squashes a fly dead on the table where they're sitting. Reproached by Titus for such an act of barbarism, he protests that it was only a fly. Titus's reply is:

> But what if that fly had a father and a mother?

It must be the most unmetrical line Shakespeare ever wrote, and in this play and from this character, very funny.

Broadening his range of jokes he then writes The Comedy of Errors and gives it a baptism at Grays Inn. Perhaps the main joke in the play is Dromio describing a very fat woman who is pursuing him as being like Ireland because of the bogs, Scotland because of her parsimony, and Spain because of the garlic on her breath, but claims he can't describe her netherlands as Belgium, out of good taste. However, Shakespeare also puts into the mouth of Adriana, the respectable wife of one of the Antipholuses, a section of agonised sexual jealousy, as x-rated as any in The Winter's Tale or Othello. So this is quite a new kind of writing, featuring the attraction of opposite emotions in the same play, and also of styles between one play and its immediate successor. Dromio's riff was probably well judged for the occasion, as he was playing to a mainly male audience of lawyers, stronger perhaps on wrangling quibbles than on good taste. But he also knows that a dose of harsh reality, such as a woman's genuine suffering, can wonderfully season a comedy. Opportunistically, he is also prompting a relationship with the Inns of Court, which will triumphantly culminate ten years later in Twelfth Night.

Already denounced by a jealous colleague as an "upstart crow", something is brewing in our new man in town. By the time the Theatre beckons to him and he becomes a part of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, his mind may already have been on ideas bigger than spotting gaps in the market and shopping around the available venues with whatever he can come up with. Perhaps it is an idea that modern theatre people embrace very easily – the thought of an independent permanent company working around the year in their own venue (together with occasional regional tours - in Shakespeare's case this would also mean invitations to grand country houses). Shakespeare would act in all probability, but also become its house (but not only) dramatist. The regularity with which he would produce two plays of such multiplicity a year for the rest of his life suggests a company not unlike our Théâtre de Complicité or Cheek by Jowl, permanently occupying a theatre such as London's Young Vic, with a group of actors always loyal but coming and going from time to time. And dependent entirely on box office receipts: at the Rose a performance of Henry VI Part Three grossed the grand total of three pounds; how they would have

welcomed an Arts Council grant, but without today's officious assessments. Perhaps a better model is the Actors Company of the 1970s or my English Shakespeare Company of the 80s and 90s.

The Theatre meanwhile was being hired by James Burbage, the father of Richard Burbage, who would rapidly become Shakespeare's star actor. The Theatre was theirs for the next six years in the 1590s with a company including Augustine Phillips (Richard II) and Will Kempe (all the clowns), and of course the child actors who played the women.

Wide-ranging as Shakespeare's plays were, there are links of one kind or another between them. Both Love's Labour's Lost and A Midsummer Night's Dream end with a performance put on for the court by enthusiastic amateurs who win out against an unruly and contemptuous audience of young aristocrats; they do it by embracing Shakespeare's impassioned belief that theatre can change people's hearts and minds and dissolve the barriers between the foreigners and clerks, lords and carpenters apprentices, illiterates and poets, so that they all become held on the same intake of breath.

In Burbage's Theatre Shakespeare now rolls out his great carpet of some dozen of our favourite plays over half a dozen years. There might seem little connection between them; but in fact they form a curious daisy chain of theme and style. Quite apart from their plays within a play, Love's Labour's Lost and A Midsummer Night's Dream are akin because they are the only two works in the canon for which Shakespeare made up the original story rather than adapting someone else's old one. Both have an unexpected moral underpinning as well as the glitter of their language and knockabout of their comedy. The former has a wonderful shock ending, in which the boys fail to win their women and are instead dispatched by them to do various semi-Herculean labours for a year before asking again - this broadcasts Shakespeare's lifelong conviction that his men, though intellectually vibrant, often have too strong a streak of complacency to justify getting what they want: the play ends on a comic but fully sincere question mark. A Midsummer Night's Dream, which I once described as being like a jig played by Beethoven, is much more than a jig. When Titania and Oberon argue about the disputed custody of their little foundling boy, they bicker like humans although they rule the fairy world, and there's little doubt who has the moral authority: Titania paints a vivid picture of the global warming that their quarrel is causing, the cattle dying in the fields, the harvests failing: it could not be more serious or speak more directly to us. In an equally contemporary way the shallower Oberon, in denial about all of it, interprets the quarrel only in terms of his sexual ownership of her.

Love's Labour's also partners Romeo and Juliet and Richard II in the sumptuousness of their lyricism, galvanic pace and high intelligence, though that might be disputed by Queen Elizabeth I, who felt that Shakespeare was making a point against her in his depiction of a monarch being successfully deposed – Richard II was revived by chance at the moment of the Earl of Essex's rebellion and until good sense prevailed, Augustine Phillips, who played Richard, and his author could have ended up in jail for incitement. (As a theatregoer Elizabeth had less enthusiasm or intelligence than her successor James). The Two Gentlemen of Verona contains songs, romanticism, and a wonderful comedy dog called Crab, but also a near-enough rape of the heroine by the hero; The Taming of the Shrew expands the misogyny of that by exhibiting a vicious battle between man and woman, though it does also suggest the possibility that bully and victim have a perverse mutual attraction; Much Ado About Nothing takes the same theme to a far more enjoyable level with much more sustained wit; The Merchant of Venice is a graphic picture of racial intolerance, though it was at the time seen as the first even half-sympathetic picture of a Jew from any English writer.

Richard III expands the Richard of Gloucester of Hary the VJ into the full blown but irresistible monster usurper, and, delving further back into history, the house dramatist also offers King John, which has a glorious death scene for the king, a narrating soliloquiser in the Bastard Falconbridge and also the devastating scene of a mother's grief over her dead son, even though the audience knows that he is not in fact dead – yet . There is a superb death scene for King Henry IV as well, towards the end of Henry IV Part Two, but that and Part One has such a host of other glories, including the great Sir John Falstaff, that it has always primarily held the stage as the definitive state of the nation play.

All these thirteen premieres in six years show that Shakespeare was always wearing the same hat but at a different angle, a sculptor working away at the same stone, turning to similar models of mirth or sorrow and putting them

to entirely different uses. Constance's misery, the agony of King Henry, the insinuations of Richard, were whispered and slammed, appealing and defying, as they swung like the action of a tiger up the three levels of the Theatre's auditorium, competing with the pedlars and the prostitutes and all the rest of it. It was thus the perfect Shakespearian space - which immediately begs the question of how the actors dealt with it. We may have the idea that they were great hams and barnstormers, pre- Stanislavski as they were, but we probably confuse them with the Victorians. With an audience on top of them both at the Rose and at the Theatre and later the Globe, they handled Shakespeare's increasingly confident shifts from the epic to such small human detail as York's tears mixing with his bloody handkerchief, the one thinning and diluting the other like soiled laundry under a tap. They understood that when someone is at an extreme, they may say something banal or off the point rather than their last word on the subject; they may meet death with a joke or an unfinished phrase, issue a serious threat offhandedly or show great courage in spite of being a coward, or whisper a condemnation rather than yell it.

In other words, the actors must from the start have known how to act in what we would recognise as a cinematic or televisual style as well as tearing a passion to tatters. And it's also likely that they'd never had to do such a thing before – Marlowe and Kyd don't much call for it. It is, by the way, a gift that comes more easily perhaps to modern actors, who are trained to project but have also often done a good deal of subtle film work before taking on these great parts in the theatre.

12th June 1599 (probably): it is the perfect showbusiness blend of modesty and boastfulness:

> Pardon gentles all
> The flat unraised spirits that have dared
> On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
> So great an object…
> May we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt? O pardon
> Since a crooked figure may
> Attest in little place a million…

Audiences are saying that this new Globe Theatre in Southwark has been built by the actors who were at the Theatre, the Lord Chamberlain's Men; apparently they stripped all its timbers during the winter and brought them over here to Southwark and constructed the Globe. They say too that Mr Shakespeare has bought a little house next door so he doesn't have to travel far to work… But this playhouse is bigger so they had to use some new timbers as well and it's got a rather multi-coloured effect…

This virtuoso prank (which forms the centre of James Shapiro's wonderful book 1599) secured the high summer of Shakespeare's career, just as the indoor Blackfriars could be seen as the autumn and the Theatre as the spring. As we watch Rosalind step out onto the empty stage in the middle of the afternoon and announce to nearly three thousand people, perhaps with a little incredulity:

> So this is the Forest of Arden

or when Viola asks her companions for her whereabouts and is told

> This is Illyria, lady

or the Prologue in Troilus and Cressida explains that

> In Troy there lies the scene

we see that this empty stage is what the playwright would now imagine every time he sat down to write.

And now a single figure turns and looks at us. We know who he is – we've watched him for an hour or so as he mourned his father, met a Ghost, swore revenge on his uncle, pretended to be mad as a means to do it or perhaps

to avoid doing it. Now he looks out at the thousands of us as if we were one person, and speaks likewise. Perhaps he takes a couple of steps towards us. Then he says something both untrue and obvious:

Now I am alone.

It's a magnificent pun. Hamlet is alone in his story and alone in our company as well, simultaneously in Elsinore and Southwark. It is hard to speak to
thousands of people at once, to speak believably, quietly sometimes and sometimes forcefully, as anyone who has acted in a Greek amphitheatre will tell you. No one has quite done it to this extent before.

Perhaps Hamlet now takes another step on the confidently thrusting forestage: he is in fact stepping into sunlight because, due to a cunning piece of theatre design and performance scheduling, the sun is directly ahead of him as he comes out from under the ceiling of the main stage and is suddenly as brightly illuminated as by a modern follow-spot.

We stare back at him; is he about to come down among and pick on us one by one for interrogation? He starts firing questions at us. Is it not monstrous that an actor can summon up tears at will while he himself cannot drop a tear or take a revenging step on behalf of his dead father? Is he a coward? Who calls him villain? Who insults him, pulling his beard or tweaking his nose?

O what a rogue
and peasant slave am I

is the most extroverted, the most self-punishing and the most intimate of Hamlet's utterances. It lurches this way and that, sometimes unmetrically, something like stand- up comedy but without the jokes. If Eiizabethan audiences were as vociferous as we suppose, how could he not have got an answer to some of these hammerblow questions?

Shakespeare has changed the theatre irrevocably and we are his heirs. He can now please the groundlings and the intellectuals at the same moment with his infinitely flexible verse: he moves from jubilation to deep suffering in a moment, from the intimate detail to the broadest sweep likewise. He allows Fluellen to be as fluent as the King In Henry V, Hamlet is put to shame by a Gravedigger, the guileless shepherd Corin makes mincemeat of the courtly affectations of Touchstone in As You Like It. In Measure for Measure the condemned prisoner Barnardine, with a marvellous mad dignity, completely confounds the disguised Duke by flatly refusing to be executed at a time that suits his convenience.

This "fantastical Duke of dark corners" has been compared to the incoming monarch James I. Certainly a new contract is needed from 1603 for Shakespeare with a new regime, and it is complex. James immediately renames the company the King's Men, the actors are made Grooms of the Chamber and march in ceremonial processions in red velvet suits. They will play at Court every three weeks rather than three months. (Can you imagine any subsequent British monarch seeing the theatre as quite such a priority?) Old plays will be revived, and new masterpieces written.

Was there a queasy feeling to this? What was to be the payback? Shakespeare's response to James was by turns accommodating and critical, James's to him generous but watchful. The Scottish King interested in witchcraft gets a Scottish play, Macbeth, which confirms the King's hope that the historical involvement of his great ancestor Banquo in Macbeth's murder of King Duncan has been transferred to the fictional Lady Macbeth. He even hears, through the Porter, approval for the public disembowelling of the harmless Jesuit priest Father Edward Garnet that he had authorised. Unfortunately, when Macbeth came to play for the first time at the Court, the event was somewhat spoiled by the behaviour of the visiting King Christian of Denmark, who had to be carried away during the performance insensate with drink, presumably through the ranks of women guests engaged in competitive vomiting from the same cause.

As if in retaliation the King's Men premiered King Lear at Hampton Court in the squalid Bacchanalia of a royal Christmas. It turned out to be Shakespeare's most ferocious assault on privilege and bad kingship, launched at an

audience sitting in ten levels of prestige between the entertainment and the towering pedestal where King James sat at the other end of the Hall.

He went further in Timon of Athens, a great potential work which was never performed while Shakespeare was alive, I should say because of its parodying of the grace and favour politicking of the Jacobean Court.

Altogether this phase of Shakespeare's life was less to do with buildings (James preferred to bring the theatre to him) but rather with court visits and grand tours. Still, without quitting the Globe, the King's Men finally took over the Blackfriars in 1607. Now they were indoors and here Jupiter could fly in from the ceiling on an eagle's back throwing a thunderbolt in Cymbeline. There were musical interludes, and pauses between scenes to trim the candles (this from an author who well understood the flow of one scene into another). Overdressed punters strolled across the stage during the show – not so strange: I've seen the same thing at Chichester. Everyone made money, but the Blackfriars sounds like a quiet reward for a life of hard work than any real new stimulus.

And Shakespeare soon retired to Stratford to deal with his family and nurse his Scrivener's Palsy (writer's cramp to you and me), occasionally breaking silence to contribute a special Shakespearian effect for John Fletcher, the King's Men's new house dramatist, such as a Queen's impassioned courtroom defence against her tyrannical royal husband, or some seamy gossip among the Citizens outside the Abbey in Henry VIII, just as he once did with the beautiful passage in Pericles when Thaisa is cast into the sea or a group of fishermen talk about the big fish eating the small ones in the sea as humans do by land. You can always tell who's writing.

And eventually in his self-effacing way, he slips away from us. Above his tomb in Stratford is a singularly unhelpful bust of Shakespeare which only suggests you wouldn't have wanted to cross him if you were a tenant farmer on his land.

I've heard Shakespeare described as not a writer but a landscape, part of most people's lives. Not so: to most of the world his words must seem as irrelevant as those of some visiting statesman. We say he's universal, but really that's a figure of speech: to a large part of the world he is as unlikely as a square meal. But in any community with the leisure or determination to clear a space in its midst for storytelling, Shakespeare, an ordinary man and not really an intellectual, reminds us of what matters and what doesn't. We still don't know a single one of his opinions, but we often quote from him without realising we're doing it. And he makes us all talented – there are moments when we can feel ourselves on the brink, just the brink, of seeing what he saw as he pounded the fields to Charlecote, weaved his way along Bankside or looked up from his desk in Stratford to see the mulberry tree he had planted in his garden at New Place. Perhaps he is thinking of the life lived: every play a winner from number 1 to number 37, and a transformation of all the theatres they played in in that short period, and the actors whose work they made better. And the knowledge that he had indeed attested in the little place of many stages a million human states of mind. Together with Chekhov, Beckett and the Greek tragedians, he gives no clue of what angered him personally or ever twist his logic to express his own view. And he used these similar but distinct buildings with their peculiar mixture of scale and confidentiality to provoke his audience as never before.

As for all us here, I think Shakespeare is very good for the health, and not just the individual health. To read him to yourself or think about him alone is certainly one of life's enrichments. But ideally, it's only a preparation for an increasingly unlikely civic act. You have to go out if you can, arrive somewhere at a certain time, negotiate a little with your fellow citizens, and become part of the process whereby a hundred, five hundred, a thousand people of completely different sensibilities, experiences of life and senses of humour become that singular organism, an audience, all held on the same breath as Hamlet approaches the praying Claudius with his sword upraised or as Malvolio presents himself to Olivia cross- gartered and in yellow stockings, a colour she abhors. On a good night we leave the high music and astonishing simplicities, the insinuation, protest and reconciliation, in an exhilarated state – alive, hugely entertained, ready for more healthy argument, more tolerant, less easily deceived: and maybe ready to go home and pull out a copy of your favourite play and try out a couple of speeches.

As for me, you probably know what I feel by now: this is a man who's got in everywhere in my life. Which is perhaps what Victor Hugo meant when he said of Shakespeare:

> He strides over proprieties, he overthrows Aristotle… He does not keep Lent. He overflows like vegetation, like germination,
> like light, like flame.

Or as the great movie producer Sam Goldwyn once put it, no less eloquently:

> Fantastic! And it was all written with a feather!