

Shakespeare Gets an M.F.A

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Alexis Kozak



Encouraging Creativity Through The Performing Arts

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SYNOPSIS: William Shakespeare finds himself in a graduate playwrighting program where his thesis advisor forces him to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet* until it is all but unrecognizable.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(TWO MEN)

PROFESSOR.....Male, 50's-60's. Playwriting professor in an MFA playwrighting program and Will's thesis advisor.

WILL.....William Shakespeare, early-20's to late-30's. He need not look like any traditional representation of the Bard. It would be better for him to look like a boyish college or graduate school student.

Note: This play contains mild adult language.

TIME
The present.

PLACE
A professor's tiny office at a university.

The set may be suggested rather than realistically represented.

SETTING
A university professor's tiny office: lined bookcases, manuscripts piled high, printer, desk, two chairs. An office door.

Shakespeare Gets an M.F.A. was secretly workshopped after-hours at Boston Playwrights' Theatre as part of the Boston University MFA Playwriting program.

DEDICATION
*This play is dedicated to
the memory of a year in Boston,
to Mike Towers, Will Fancher, Chris Martin, and
Masha Obolensky,
and, most of all,
to our esteemed professor, Richard Schotter.*

AT RISE:

PROFESSOR sits at desk, writing in a notebook. As he writes, he laughs and giggles at what he is writing.

WILL, a young man, appears at the office door. Knocks.

WILL: Um, Professor?

PROFESSOR: Yes. Will.

WILL: Um, I was wondering if you had a chance to take a look at the stuff I'd written so far?

PROFESSOR: Oh, yeah, the Romeo uh . . . ?

WILL: *Romeo and Juliet.*

PROFESSOR: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

WILL: . . . Well?

PROFESSOR: Well, graduation is in May. We're in April. It would've been nice to get your thesis play in December.

WILL: I thought quality would be more important than timeliness.

PROFESSOR: . . . And this is the high quality version?

WILL: . . . Yes.

PROFESSOR: *(Noncommittally.)* Well, I liked it.

WILL: But . . . ?

PROFESSOR: Well, it didn't grab me.

WILL: No?

PROFESSOR: Do you have a copy of it with you?

WILL: Oh, yeah, yeah, sure.

WILL takes a copy out of his bag. *It is a modern manuscript, complete with brads.*

PROFESSOR: Pick it up a little bit from the top.

WILL: Okay. Um, *Romeo and Juliet.* Act I, Prologue.

"Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge . . .

PROFESSOR makes pretend SNORING SOUNDS.

WILL: Break to . . . *(PROFESSOR continues making SNORING SOUNDS.)*

PROFESSOR: I'm pretending it put me to sleep, see? Because it's so boring. *(Grabbing the manuscript. Going at it with his pen.)* Cut this. Cut this. Cut this. Cut this. *(Tosses the manuscript back to Will.)* You can say what you're saying in one word: "Verona." What the hell you need a prologue for anyway? A play opens, you want to drop the audience into the high speed express lane. This opening, I feel like I'm stuck behind a senior citizen on Sunday morning. I'm on the express train to Slumberville by line four.

WILL: *(Looking at the manuscript.)* Yeah, I can see what you're saying.

PROFESSOR: And what's the conflict? Boy wants girl. So, run away together. And then you introduce this thing with the Monk and it just gets very "plotty."

WILL: Yeah, I sort of felt that way, too.

PROFESSOR: Now, I had a play. Two Jewish guys who own a sporting goods store. Except the one wants to be a stand-up comic. I don't know where that came from, but one day, I sat down to write, and this guy just says, "I have a secret I never told anybody. I want to be a stand-up comic." You see what I'm saying?

WILL: I do. I do.

PROFESSOR: I mean, the guy wants something important. Something with big stakes. He wants to be a comic. But he's stuck in this sporting goods store. I mean, that's conflict. That's drama. This? I mean, what is this? It's a whiny high school kid is essentially what it is.

WILL: You're right, you're right.

PROFESSOR: And the *euphuisms*, all this flowery exploration of the images. I mean, it's like you stick a straw into an image and you just keep blowing it up until it's ready to pop. I mean, "Oh, to be a hand in the glove that touches your face," blah, blah, blah. He loves her. We gef it. Move on.

WILL: Yeah, yeah.

PROFESSOR: This? This is maybe a poem. Maybe a performance art piece. But it's not a play.

WILL: No?

PROFESSOR: See, I like that. Nice short answer. None of this "thee," "thou," "though." You meant "no," you said "no." I don't need a whole soliloquy on it. It doesn't sound like real people talking. You get what I'm saying?

WILL: But what about "voice."

PROFESSOR: Voice shmoice. You can already do *this*. I'm trying to get you to do something else. You wanna have some other things in your bag of tricks. You walk into a TV studio, and they're like, "Write me a scene about, uh, I don't know, uh, two guys and a bag of money and a gun," you better be able to write a scene about two guys and a bag of money and a gun.

WILL: Yeah. I want to be able to do that.

PROFESSOR: And you gotta start thinking like a producer a little bit. I mean, swords? I gotta get fucking swords for this play? And a thousand masks for this mask ball scene. I mean, you're shooting yourself in the foot. You gotta make your plays easy to produce. I mean, you may as well throw a dog and a kid in there while you're at it, *Swords*. And it's like a cast of thousands. Listen, I just had a *nine* character play rejected by the Long Wharf Theatre. *Nine* characters. And you're writing this thing with one, two, three, thirty-six characters. Nobody's going to touch this thing with a ten foot barge pole.

WILL: ... So what should I do?

PROFESSOR: Do you trust me?

WILL: Well, I'll tell you the truth. I was a little put off by the last critique. I went home, and I told my wife, "This jerk doesn't know what the heck he's talking about."

PROFESSOR: Go ahead, you said, "That effing effer doesn't know what the effing eff he's effing talking about!"

WILL: (*Laughing.*) That's exactly what I said. I went to bed so pissed off that night. Then, an hour later, I sat straight up in bed, reached over to the bedside table, grabbed my script, and changed it. You were totally right.

PROFESSOR: See?

WILL: Othello works much better as a white guy.

PROFESSOR: I'm always right. Never forget that.

WILL: Here's my dilemma. I want to be able to do the things you want me to do, but I also want to keep my integrity.

PROFESSOR: What's integrity get you?

WILL: Being able to live with yourself.

PROFESSOR: You want to live with yourself, you should've gone to graduate school to be a Tibetan monk. You want to write plays, you write about *characters* with integrity. You don't need to have any of your own. Have you ever read a play and been like, "Hey, this playwright's really got some integrity?" If you're thinking about the playwright while you're reading the play, he's got a problem. Integrity. I think you need to seriously ask yourself, are you looking at this thing as a business, or are you looking at it as a hobby?

WILL: I want to make the perfect play.

PROFESSOR: So, a hobby, then.

WILL: No.

PROFESSOR: The perfect play isn't gonna pay the mortgage. The popular play is. You gotta figure out what the audience wants.

WILL: True.

PROFESSOR: And then give them less.

WILL: Yes.

PROFESSOR: Except in the instances of underwriting, in which case, you gotta figure out, what does the audience need?

WILL: Agreed.

PROFESSOR: And then give it to them.

WILL: How do you know the difference?

PROFESSOR: It's not brain surgery. A little more or less play, no one dies.

WILL: So how can I save this play?

PROFESSOR: You gotta go back to the question, "What's it about?"

WILL: I was hoping you could tell me.

PROFESSOR: Unh, unh, unh! That's chicken shit! The writer's gotta know what it's about.

WILL: If I knew, I wouldn't have to be in school, would I?

PROFESSOR: You know what I think? I think this play needs a dreamer.

WILL: It's not that kind of play.

PROFESSOR: Dreamers are great in plays.

WILL: But - -

PROFESSOR: Okay, you're right, two dreamers.

WILL: But - -

PROFESSOR: I love it.

WILL: (*Slightly sarcastically.*) Why stop at two?

PROFESSOR: Too many dreamers will ruin a play. And you gotta do something about this knife thing at the end? Are you getting the most dramatic bang for your buck?

WILL: You don't think it works?

PROFESSOR: It goes back to the old joke, "How many dramaturges does it take to change a light bulb?"

WILL: Uh, one to screw in the light bulb, and . . . I don't know, ten?

PROFESSOR: "Does it have to be a light bulb?"

WILL: I guess it doesn't have to be a light bulb.

PROFESSOR: No, that's the punch line.

WILL: Oh . . . Oh, I get it.

PROFESSOR: Does it have to be a knife? Could it be a noose? I mean, what else could she do? Could she jump off a bridge? Could she asphyxiate herself in the garage? Could she shoot herself in the head with her dad's service revolver? You see where I'm going with this?

WILL: Sort of.

PROFESSOR: Just as an exercise, write forty-five different endings. You might learn something about your characters you hadn't thought of before.

WILL: Okay. So, overall, where do I stand with the thesis?

PROFESSOR: Well, frankly, I'm a little disappointed. You're in the M.F.A. program. You're here for a Master of Fine Arts. But, it looks to me like you're going to walk away with an MJOA.

WILL: What's an MJOA?

PROFESSOR: A Master of Just Okay Art.

WILL: I think I'm just getting distracted. I get all these great ideas for these short little things that are really brilliant little gems. But I feel like I can't sustain that brilliance over the span of a full-length play. I think these smaller pieces act as distractions that my subconscious is throwing up to prevent me from finishing the longer ones. So I end up with drawers full of these great opening scenes and short little pieces.

PROFESSOR: Opening scenes are easy to write.

WILL: Like, I have this great ten-minute play about this prince kid whose uncle kills his father, the king, and marries the prince's mother, and then the kid's father's ghost comes back and wants revenge.

PROFESSOR: Plotty.

WILL: And another one about these fairies and they turn this guy into a donkey.

PROFESSOR: Stupid.

WILL: And another one where - -

PROFESSOR: Stop writing!

WILL: What?

PROFESSOR: Buy a hot tub.

WILL is furiously scribbling notes.

WILL: OK.

PROFESSOR: Sit in it.

WILL: OK . . . (*WILL still scribbles furiously.*) . . . and?

PROFESSOR: Sit in it.

WILL: Yeah, I got that.

PROFESSOR: That's the best thing you can do for your writing.

WILL: How's that gonna help my writing?

PROFESSOR: It's not, but at least you'll be comfortable while you're waiting. I got the number for a good guy. Same day installation. Hey, don't be discouraged. Nobody makes a living at this.

WILL: I think I can.

PROFESSOR: Welcome to the real world, son. Better you know it now than later. Before you wake up forty years from now, a couple of published plays under your belt, a tiny university office, no window, two failed marriages, a crippling mortgage, mild artistic success, and you look back at your life and you realize you're a bitter old man. People like that really stick in my craw.

WILL: You're destroying my dream.

PROFESSOR: Good. That's exactly what I'm doing. You're very good at identifying actions. That's important for a playwright.

WILL: You want to destroy my dream?

PROFESSOR: It's my job as a teacher of playwrighting.

WILL: It is?

PROFESSOR: I'd be doing you a disservice if I told you you were going to make it.

WILL: So you're seeing if I really want it?

PROFESSOR: No, I'm just genuinely trying to rip your heart out.

WILL: To hurt me, so I'll have something to write about.

PROFESSOR: Nope. Just cause it makes me feel better about myself.

PROFESSOR turns back to his own writing, ignoring WILL. WILL sits, stunned. Eventually, PROFESSOR notices WILL is still there.

PROFESSOR: Hey, hey, hey, remember, if you already knew everything, you wouldn't be in school.

WILL: Well, that takes the pressure off.

PROFESSOR: And if I don't have a playable draft in my hands first thing tomorrow morning, you're out of the program.

WILL: Well, that puts the pressure on.

PROFESSOR: And remember, hot tub.

PROFESSOR turns back to his own writing.

WILL: (Sadly.) Professor . . . ?

PROFESSOR: What? . . . Oh, the number for the guy.

PROFESSOR scribbles down the number, rips off a piece of paper, gives it to WILL.

PROFESSOR returns to his own writing. WILL stands sadly, watching PROFESSOR, holding his own manuscript in his arms like a dead baby. WILL lays his manuscript down on the chair. He turns to leave.

PROFESSOR looks up from his writing.

PROFESSOR: (Catching WILL at the door.) Will, your script.

WILL: It's not mine anymore.

PROFESSOR: What do you mean?

WILL: This is no longer the play I wrote. It's something else now.

PROFESSOR: (After a few moments.) Will, remember, I'm always right.

After a few moments, WILL exits, leaving behind his manuscript on the chair.

PROFESSOR sighs, stands, picks up manuscript, unfastens the brads, and puts it in his printer tray upside down to use as scrap printer paper.

PROFESSOR sits at his desk, opens notebook, writes.

Lights down.

THE END