

MY SHAKESPEARE

A
SHORT PLAY
BY
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Production History: This play was first performed as part of the Sushi 2000: Bare Bones Theatre program at the Calvin College Lab Theatre in January 2000.

On Shakespeare

What needs my Shakespeare for his honored bones
The labor on an age in pilèd stones,
Or that his hallowed relics should be hid
Under a star-ypointing pyramid?
Dear son of memory, great heir of fame,
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a livelong monument.
For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavoring art
Thy easy number flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book
Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;
And so sepulchered in such pomp dost lie,
That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

Milton

Dramatis Personæ:

Howitzer, a long-winded, loud inventor.

Derringer, a soft-spoken, quiet poet.

Lincoln, a tall, sharp spirit.

Roosevelt, a short, boisterous spirit.

Van Buren, a medium, quiet spirit.

Scene: A room; a field.

Curtain.

Derringer sitting at a table with a pen and few sheets of paper, trying to write. A large strange-looking contraption with a door on it sits off to the side.

Der. Sighs. The world's inventors can't create that which
The poet hath. Yet I, the poet laureate

Of my own mind, am one outdone by other men's
Inventions. O this sheet of breath is wasted air:
Blank verse it is: 'tis blank in aim, abounds
In verse. I write today, yet my intent
Precedes o' yesterday.

Enter Howitzer.

My friend, what has ta'en you so long?
How: Beware the frozen wasteland roads
Whose treachery does in too many fools
While driving in their motorized device
Whose superficial wheels possess minds of
Their own, electing paths of their own choice,
Confusing their unwary mount as well
As those who ride.
Der: I pray you, what has come to pass?
How: Why, my life before my eyes.
As you should know, I've been to town, procured
A little thing -- I'll tell o' that right soon.
Meandering with great intent, as swift
As greasèd light I drove myself to home.
And I, unfortunate, perchanced upon
Some ice -- a deadly act, you know.
Sings.
I know a road all couched with snow,
As pretty as a wreath,
But note, dear love, not what's on top
But what deceives beneath.

Then demons foulest of the ice did wrest
The car from my control and send it reeling to
A bank of snow, to leave a mark indelibly
Etched in't. I sat in anger stunned till when
My eyes beheld th' impression that it made;
'Twas beauteous and bold -- a noble stamp --
It's features eloquent and weighty. Strange --
E'en in my almost death I left my mark.
Der: Methinks thou art long winded, not in the
Rank breaking of, but in the speaking of.
How: Your joke falls stale.
Der: As does your speech.
How: Peace, my friend.
Methinks the fingers of frustration have
Now gripped thee by the throat and do intend
To choke thy words from written thought and speech.

Der: Indeed, in manner like I'm hoarse.
How: Nay, nay,
Let's linger none.
Der: As if your speech has not
Done so already.
How: I shall ignore that now.
Haste haste, I must to work.
Der: Time's a-wasting, eh?
How: Hah! No! Our time we'll not misspend again,
For by my art its workings shall I seize
And grasp to loose at my will's whim.
This box: seems it plain to your eyes? I'll tell --
There's more beneath its dull exterior
Than you might think. Like the damned ice I so
Conveniently discovered with my car
Most recently --
Der: Of such I lightly heard.
How: Feel free to close your mouth at any time.
Der: Consider it secured.
How: I reckon not for long.
Der: The poet often speaks and raises enemies.
How: May I continue, please?
Der: Do, do, my chum.
How: At last. As like the hidden ice below
The petty prettiness of fallen snow
There rests a slicker aim to my machine.
Der: How does it work?
How: I'll show you presently.
It is a mere equation's sum:
By means of metaphysical affair
It loosens time's firm sprockets and peals back
The giant door -- till now a locked gate barred
To all mankind. Like players stealing through
Their curtain to an empty stage of their
Own choice, I choose an age to visit thence.
Through this our history we can complete,
Predict the future with accuracy
Belonging to the weathermen -- nay, nay,
Poor choice of metaphor -- we will predict
Like lethal snipers hitting deadly marks.
O this contraption's greatness will succeed
And make my person twice as great! And more!
These dainty hands can now reverse or push
Ahead those monstrous hands of time. What can
They not do now?
This blatant excellence instilled

With my great quantities o' quality:
Humility plus goodness true and some,
Subtracting pride and ceremonial good,
Subscribed with gen'ral prowessness --
O that addition equals my renown!

Der: I fail to understand thee and doubt these
Beholders num'rous comprehend your speech. Indicates audience.
O, simply, simply, for our sake!

How: Nay, nay,
I cannot such. The audience will mark
The orator more deeply when the skill
Of ambiguity serves as interpreter.
It's a ploy, man.

Der: The ploy's the thing.

How: My ambiguity is my invisible
Associate whom others strive to see.
Where lies a chest there's sure to be a jewel
Inside.

Der: Where puddles form there's sure to be
A hole beneath.

How: Good shot, my friend, I shan't
Forget so quick and wise a phrase. But soft,
I must complete my work. Enters contraption through door. Sound of working.

Der: Aside. Now toils there one who thinks the flapping of
His wings reverses all the cross-world winds.
If he runs opposite the globe's rotation
He thinks he'll contradict its idle turn
And send it fleeing forth in modified direction.
If only he knew such an act would send
Us reeling into space. Heh heh. He'd prob'bly cling
To nearby trees and keep this planet for
Himself. And then he'd mourn that none could see
The world he owns. Methinks the world he's now
Is one too much already and the one
I own a bit too small. O silent night,
Consume my words no more. I have not heart.

How: As sad as it may seem, I need a hand
At finishing my eminence.

Der: I'm shocked.

How: I shall be too if I attempt to wire
This instrument alone.

Der: How horrible.

How: You're telling me. Now will you help?

Der: I lack
The will to do much else. I need a break.

How: By this you mean...?

Der: ...I'll give my aid, of course.
Enters contraption. Sound of more working.

How: Now twist these wires concurrently.

Der: It's done.

How: And couple thence these circuit parts.

Der: To what?

How: Into the plugs on either side.

Der: This makes
No sense. 'Tis tangled over all belief.

How: Yet only the creator understands.

Der: What does this knob?

How: Touch not! Or be dismayed!

Der: Dismayed by knobs? How odd this is. What do
These brightly-lit displays?

How: They bring to light
The traveler's a-destined course. See, here's
The hour, day, and year displayed.

Der: We're in
A time machine?

How: I thought I told you so
Before.

Der: But as you said, your best friend ambiguity
Has once again obscured your train of thought
To those -- like me -- who seek to fathom your
Design. I do not wish to be transported to
Another time; the present here is much
Too intricate for me as is. I must get out.

How: Relax and trust me just for once.

Der: I'll do
My best.

How: Now do me favor and please pass
Those 'lectric batteries. And step aside
Whilst I perform a marv'lous feat of binding two
Connections here.

Der: I'd move if space allowed.

How: Hey! Ouch! Please quit your shoving now.

Der: I lack
The room to move. Quit being such a hog.

How: A hog! You'll note that this machine is mine
To hog. Step back or be stepped back.

Der: 'That is
The question' -- oops! Methinks I've struck
The taboo knob. Contraption begins to light up and hum.

How: O rotten curses! O
The door's a-locked! I'm gone! A banished soul

By my own hand! O fool! O fool!

Dazzling light betakes the stage. A gigantic flash, then Howitzer and Derringer are gone, leaving only the table with Derringer's writings and Howitzer's machine slowly winding down.

A few moments of silent darkness, then the dazzling light and gigantic flash. Howitzer and Derringer stand in an open field, crammed together like they were when they disappeared. They stand silently for a long moment.

Der: It works.

How: O what relief such thoughts do bring!
Where are we now?

Der: The past, I think. Or could
A future look so desolate as this?

How: As if I care. Whatever gold we've struck
Is shallow cash; a million miles and still
Nowhere to go: my own success my own
Defeat! Where can a man find greatness if
The crowds are scattered 'way?

Der: How can you think
Of grandest wealth when basic needs are yet
Unmet? Come, we must eat some nat'ral food
Ere prominence lays out a feast; I'd rather not
An honest starving artist be. Although
Pain batters at my self, I feel compelled
To persevere and strive against disheartened thought.
We're still on earth, and fruit and food abound;
The rivers run, the rain still falls; we'll yet survive!
Despair yourself and die in undistinguished plight
Or amend your manner, make your life a life-
Like monument to your vast strength. Aside. Yet still
The heart's lament hurts more than stomach's growls.
To How. But come, we must find shelter, food, and rest.
There waits substantial thinking to be done.

How: I'm done forthwith. My heart's been halved. How can
You find the will to live? See, I am moved
Almost to tears.

Der: Think of the tears as an
Accomplishment in humanness. My heart's
As rent as yours. But come, let's go.

Enter Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Van Buren. Throughout this next exchange, Howitzer mouths a long, woeful, pathetic reply to Derringer. They do not notice the spirits.

Lin: To Ros. and Van. I say, I'm qualified to meet the post
Much more than either you. If I'm not won,

I fear the disappointment of our kind
 Constituency.

Ros: Disappointed that
 They have no weak buffoon to push around.

Lin: Buffoon!

Van: Ho!

Ros: Yea! A chump to humble at
 Their feet. A dog to cage at slightest whim.
 A clown to juggle crowns and drop them at
 Their feet. One who can not stand for his benefit.

Lin: Fie! I resent those tones. You know right well
 I stand quite well for my behalf. Besides,
 If they desire infirm, as you may say,
 They'll surely vote you in: they'll find a low
 And scandal-ridden lug-a-bed in you.

Van: While on affairs of scandalism, one
 Might note I stand unstained by crimes I've never done.

Ros: Because you've done no thing at all.

Van: Aside. Resentment stalls since I'm too weary now.
 They spend their strength in hot dispute
 Ingraining counterfeit faults on the other's head
 Whilst polishing their image clean of flaw,
 And I, alone, spend it in fair advance --
 Still they win the attention from the mob.

Ros: To Lin. I stand in undiminishable character
 A-ridden only by a moral base.
 I stand in unimaginable grandeur; of
 What use are you?

Lin: As much as thou.

Ros: Ah -- oh.
 A stumbling block before the running man.
 But one small trip will just prolong the surefire win
 Of 'yours most truly': me.

Lin: You must mean: 'yours'
 'A-mostly true.'

Ros: But most is more than none
 Like you.

Lin: Noticing How. and Der. Behold, the strangers in our midst.

Ros: And in a mist of bafflement confused.

Lin: They art dressed oddly.

Ros: Yea, they do stand out.

Lin: Observe, hear what they speak.

How: Winding up his tirade. ...And thus there is no end to which my strength
 May be employed. These hands are dead of use.

Der: How can one so attached to feats of pride

Become so disenchanted thus? But why?
 How: O leave me be. I'll rot in peace alone.
 Der: Noticing the spirits. Not quite alone, but maybe better so.
 Lin: Approaching them. Ho! Greetings, weary travelers!
 Ros: We give
 Thee welcome to this land! How are you?
 Van: Hi.
 Der: Well, not quite great, but not as bad as some
 May think.
 Lin: Tell us, how came you here?
 How: By our
 Mistake.
 Lin: But no! For this mistake of yours
 Can help correct a plight of ours. We are
 Great spirits three: I -- Lincoln, and he -- Roosevelt,
 And he -- Van Buren, third. Our names themselves
 Are great.
 Der: 'What's in a name?' And spirits of
 What kind? Of what, of whom are you?
 Lin: Just spirits of
 The all --
 Ros: All ev'rything --
 Van: All nothing still.
 Ros: We've come to claim your vote.
 How: Our vote?
 Lin: For owner of
 This land.
 Der: Which land?
 Lin: Why, all the land with sky
 Above 't. And you must choose -- according to
 Who's been the most benevolent to thee.
 Ros: Whichever face you'd like to see administering grace
 And truth, amending wrongs, admonishing
 The evil-doers of this world.
 Lin: And governing
 With firm and steady hand, with wise and even speed,
 Above all, with a just and kindly poise.
 Der: Aside. I think to cast my vote for the mute soul.
 Van Buren seeks a scarcity in speech
 While they pursue small fortunes in't.
 Ros: If thou
 Wilt vote for me, I'll give thee quantities
 Of acreage to raise a monument
 In honor of yourselves.
 Lin: And I.
 Van: And I.

Lin: Just pick a mount or hill, a sea or lake,
A river or a stream and I'll allow
You to name 't for yourself.

Ros: Likewise.

Van: Likewise.

Ros: So what's your vote? Quick, time's a-wasting 'way.

How: What time is it?

Ros: Looking at watch. A quarter past mid-life.

Der: A what?

Ros: You should have listened the first time.
I said, 'A quarter past mid-life.'

Der: What's the
Next hour to be upon us?

Ros: Death.

How: Death?

Der: When
Is that?

Ros: At the end of the day.

Der: Of what
Inherent hours consists your clock?

Ros: But three:
Birth, mid-life, death; our present juncture lies
At quarter past mid-life.

How: Hysterically. We're past mid-life
So soon?

Ros: To Lin. and Van. The crisis hour.

How: The greatest woe
Has keeled us o'er! Our lives are swamped and thus
Descend below the waves!

Der: What of the woes
For which you cried a plethora of tears?
Won't take you joy that death shall snuff inactive life
And save thee from a death of constant bore?
Unless... Does death so earnestly speed its
Way hence? To the spirits. How many days contains your calendar?

Ros: Why, only one; its minutes pass as slow
As years. Pause. You know, the spot of land on which
You stand shall someday be a city --

How: A
Town shall be here?

Der: How strange to think.

Ros: -- And when
The city's founders build their town -- which one
Day will be a metropolis -- they'll need
A souvenir -- a landmark of magnanimity and
Prosperity. Why not a chronicle of you?

Der: Say you this past progresses 'to our future time?
 Lin: Indeed, though years three thousand it will be.
 Ros: The real estate you'll want can be supplied
 By me -- that is, if you'll be kind enough
 To vote me in. Need I say 'please' as well?
 How: Aside. 'Though years three thousand it will be.' Yet how
 Long have the mighty mountains stood? O peace,
 My mind! It's troubled waters are stirred by
 The churning storm of thought. Take shelter now!
 Ideas strike like beams of lightning quick.
 To the spirits. I pray you, spirits -- yonder mountain range:
 How long has it cast its long shadow down?
 Ros: Why, since the start of time.
 How: And how long till
 It falls?
 Ros: Until the end of time.
 How: And does
 Time's most untimely death come following
 Three thousand years?
 Ros: Yea, plus much more.
 How: Suddenly starting to leave and pulling Derringer with him.
 We thank thee, spirits, for your time but fear
 Our exit comes most mandatorily.
 Lin: What?
 Ros: What?
 Van: What?
 Der: What?
 How: Uh, yes, we've got
 Some pressing business to attend to we've
 Forgotten up till now. And so: adieu,
 Farewell, good-bye, we take our leave, and go!
 Der: I cast my vote for ghost Van Buren ere
 I go!
 How: And likewise, I. God give you peace!
 Van: I'd offer thanks if they'd not gone so soon.

Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Van Buren depart.

Der: Need I remind you we've nowhere to go?
 How: No, but we must get going anyway.
 Der: To what design? To get more lost? At least
 We've no lack of space to do so.
 How: Did hear you now what just the spirits said?
 Der: Concerning what?
 How: See thou this land, this land
 Beneath our feet? Their dirt foundation shall

Eventually base the men of future times,
Uphold their cities, farms, and roads. And knowest this?
The future builds upon the past as days
Upon days, hours upon hours, minute to
The sixtieth second, the everlasting current's tide
That sweeps all nature in its path and stops
At ev'ry era, year, millennium -- yea, e'en
The speck of instances so small existence is
Forbidden them. The mountains crouched before
Us wait till other men come 'round and then
Still crouch and bide. Remember this, my friend:
Sings.

The nuclear man has claimed the world
And scarred it with his rage,
But primitive one had twice the fun,
Begun in early age.

Der: What do you mean by this?

How: Yet mark: verse two:

Sings.

The nuclear man, while vast of deed
Is stuck in modern times,
But primitive one, though lacking guns,
Does longer-lasting crimes.

Do not you see? What we do now shall last
Till hist'ry's come! Our deeds of now affect
The time we know as ours.

Der: What can we do?

How: We'll move the mountains, reroute rivers, name
Them for ourselves; leave monuments and write
Long, novel, grand biographies as epitaphs
For us so future folks will know that greatness made
His home in us! Come!
Howitzer begins rushing back and forth as if looking for something.

Der: When in Rome --

How: We'll build

Rome! Come!

Der: -- do as the Roman does. Perhaps.

How: Ha! Good call! We'll 'invent' clichés, which have
Not yet been overused.

Der: And how's your pledge

Like: veni vidi vici?

How: Ha! My friend,

Your genius overwhelms me. Now, we shall
Create the language Latin to seem as

The gods! Know you a phrase or two to use?
Der: Yes: desunt nonnulla.
How: What's that mean?
Der: 'Something is
Lacking.'
How: That's a start. You said 'veni vidi vici' and
I'm three for three on that. E pluribus unum --
I couldn't have expressed it better by
Myself -- But wait! I'm saying it myself!
Get it? Ha ha! It's great! O! Carpe diem -- Ha!
I've got it by the neck and won't let go!
Der: Why not add English to your godly accolades
Since you speak it so well?
How: A bold idea, sir!
It's done! I need a slot of paper so 's
To write it down.
Der: We have not paper here.
How: We have not paper here? Well then we shall invent 't!
O grand proliferation and productiveness:
Let these hands bless themselves and do their owner proud!
Der: Before you start, may I some water drink?
How: A drink? Of course! We'll ascertain the atom! Yes!
H - 2 - O! That's one! O - 2! There's one more!
We're geniuses of highest rank! O Shakespeare, Einstein we've
All foiled! Inventors, poets, generals --
We've got them on their knees! O kings and queens
And presidents -- your nations' fates are in
Our hands! E'en nature bows before our will!
The planet's course is ours to choose. My one
Regret: we won't be there to see our great
Effects take place.
Der: One rarely is.

Exit Howitzer still as if he is searching.

Der: To be or not to be is never more
A question, for man must be, and be so
Significantly that he leaves his scar
Upon the world. See how he's dug throughout
The earth; see how he's drained the oceans out.
Why, man would claim the sky and name it if
He could. He'd make the sky his board, and clouds
His chalk with which to teach the world his views.
It's evident in my companion and
The louder spirits: men who fish for adjectives
Galore, who want superlatives for their

Important qualities. What now, my friend?
He who won't sit unless a throne's below.
To him it matters whether not he has
Something to say for he will only say
It loud. Proclaim the greatness! Make it known!
Hear the unearned joyful news! For him,
Accomplishment is saying something louder than
All else: a self-enthraling siren call.
He even seeks to be a god; he'll take
The fruit and eat it whole. He'll whisper soft,
He'll talk, he'll shout. And shout. And shout. And shout...
While I myself still search for what to say.
I wonder, then, if man knows not his thoughts
Should he speak out, explore through speech till he
Has found his mind, or should he seal his mouth
And find another way? If man has looked
Before he leapt, then should he think about
It, too? Yet man would prob'bly leap if it
Could benefit himself: a martyr for
The greatest cause, the tortured soul for his
Own gain, one self-sacrificial to his
Own monument. And thus, the grandest goal,
The simplest scheme: to pen a name with ink
Immortal. I wish not to pen my name,
But simply pen my words -- perchance on sheets
Of everlasting paper, and perchance
To not. At least they're mine -- to share or keep,
But to say either way. In this place where
The softest voice may stretch a thousand miles
And find no ears to note, I'm thankful I
May say something at all, with words in me,
My mouth, my heart, my mind:
Saying it quietly is loud enough for me.