

OUR REVELS

I had gone down to the river at dusk to rehearse Shakespeare not to meet him. That night I would be playing Ariel in *The Tempest* as part of the April 2023 *Midautumn Night's Dream* festival in the New Globe Theatre at Stratford in Gippsland. This was to mark the end of COVID restrictions. Four of his plays one after another would be performed through the night and timed for the last, *The Tempest*, to end at dawn.

No-one was around so I recited out loud Ariel's speech mocking the shipwrecked men. A voice from the bridge above me gave Prospero's response: "Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated/In what thou hadst to say". A middle-aged man came down. He wore a shirt, a doublet, puff breeches, hose, and one earring; he had the hair and beard of the Chandos portrait of Shakespeare. He spoke with a Jacobean pronunciation.

I introduced myself; he gave his name as "William Shakespeare". I decided to play along with him as he was clearly either a maniac, an extreme 24/7 "immersion in character" actor – the same thing, really – or someone who had gone far into the "authentic" approach to Shakespeare's theatre. He said that he had come back to Stratford, asked where Holy Trinity Church had gone, and said that the heat was greater that he remembered from his youth. I noted that "Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines". He looked pleased and asked where he had come. I said "Stratford in Gippsland - at the other side of the world from Stratford in England".

He asked who this Gipps was – "peradventure a braggart war leader, an engrossing burgher whose estate had grown large from usance and argosies, or a waterfly favourite lord at court". On hearing that we had no court and no sovereign but a Prime Minister position occupied in turn over only nine years by five leaders (one twice), he asked how one overthrown by a supplanter could clamber back to rule and not die in the press of battle or on the headsman's block. I explained that we didn't destroy past leaders; they usually did that to themselves.

When he asked whether his plays were still performed, I answered that he was considered the greatest playwright ever in any country but that some people claimed that his plays had been written by someone else: either Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, or others. Just then came towards us Peter Rudge, a theatre director known as Bitter Grudge for his habit of praising his own unperformable plays and, as no-one would put these on, disparaging in private any Shakespeare plays he did get to direct. The Stratford committee had not invited Rudge to direct at the festival so he turned up just to cause trouble.

Rudge in a loud voice gave us his set piece on the case for the Earl of Oxford and against Bacon and Shakespeare as contenders: Shakespeare being just an ignorant front-man for an aristocrat who had the background and culture to write well. Rudge boasted that in his Shakespeare productions the actors in the clown roles – Bottom, Dogberry, and so on – were made up to look like Shakespeare and so present him as an ignorant yokel.

William asked me “Do you know this captious cavilling railer, this tetchy hammer-head, this Herod ?” then answered Rudge with “Sirrah, Attorney-General Bacon carried too much ballast of learning and too little sail of fancy to speed the ship of a play. With my Lord Oxford, an addled quarrelling puppy, ‘twas on the contrary side - all the sail of his capering brawling humours and no ballast of good sense. Attorney me no attorneys, lord me no lords. Thou mightst as well give my place to Rafe, the drawer at the Swan Tavern. Go to and elsewhere spew forth the venom of thy dull inventions. Thou canst not pluck me down, canst find no hole in my coat.”

Rudge said that William’s pronunciation was an attempt but still not accurate; if William wanted to try to do an authentic Jacobean pronunciation, he could start with some basic training in phonetics. William replied “Phrenetics ? I espy one before me. My words hang not upon my tongue. Scoff not at my speech; why dost thou serve me so ? ‘I am the best of them that speak this speech, were I but where ‘tis spoken’.” Rudge turned his back on us and walked away.

William sighed and said “Uneasy lies the hand that pens a verse. All fair things vanish but I had thought my good name to keep. Green-eyed enviers of other men’s travails did rant and gibber in my day and seek to lick the fat from another’s pot. Like ivy, they stand not alone but cling to the tree they strangle. Yet they feared me as I carried the deadly stockado in my pen. In my life all held me the true begetter of my plays; none did term me a suborned puppet to filch forth another’s work under my name, a cozening zany to vizard another’s face. Such as he still ring the clappers of their tongues; I contemn them, I disrelish them. Let them shift for themselves. Their malice can touch me no further. I am out of time’s treasury.

I will unfold myself to you as I account you honest. Each hundred year after our death we shades have leave to stir abroad, to return to where we wish on earth and, for the brief hours from dusk to dawn, walk one night again under the silver moon in the streets of our days. None do see us pass as none remember us. I am visible to sight in this place as here I am spoken of and so brought to mind.

The first time, we gaze at gravestones to see when our children and grandchildren died. The next and later times, we wander to call to memory past meetings; our joy lies behind. Peace to these poor ghosts. When morning cock crows, we return whence we came. This time again I asked for Stratford but the trammelling jack who ordains such matters chose this other Stratford and acted seven years late. He recked not his task but would speak to me only of the pelf he had amassed up on life though such we may not bring to where we now dwell.” I said “Sounds like an unlamented neo-liberal economist.” William asked “An ‘economist’? Some thrifty householder?” I glossed the modern meaning: “A finical rogue, a caterpillar of the commonwealth battenning on the general. Just where do you dwell between your visits?”. William replied “We are forbid to unfold these arcana or our visits would end; yourself will know all soon enough.”

The *Tempest* director ran down to me to say that her Prospero actor was ill and could not perform and that we would have to use the understudy even though he did not know the role completely. She ended with “What will be will be.” William said “Will will be what will be. I

know the part well as I wrote it. Come, I have been sent the span of this round world to the Antipodes of my quondam home. Just so, I would end as I began: a player treading the stage. Look you now at your Prospero - for the traffic of the stage needs run.” and recited the “Ye elves of hills...” speech. I said that William and I would rehearse the play together until we were needed. The director agreed and asked if I had seen Helen, explaining “our Miranda” to William who said “There be women players ? Better far than boys, bantlings who must act when first they peep out of their shells.”

All went well on stage. William knew the role almost by heart; in some of the longer speeches he had to busk a little by improvising in passable verse. Backstage during the interval he spoke to the actors, praising them with “ ‘O brave new world that hath such people in it’ ”, asking them about their past roles, admiring the modern lighting, and discussing the stage business in the play.

At the end, as usual, all the actors except Prospero left the stage. Prospero then advanced to the front of the stage and, instead of reciting the play’s *Epilogue*, said:

“Each eve from North is Helios hid
 He slumbers not the night amid
 Whenas his car sinks from my skies
 He wills in brighter clime to rise
 His light to shed on Southern stage -
 A second Globe, a second age.
 So may my verses live anew
 And please another world in you.”

Rudge, who had gone to his front-row seat halfway through the play, now called out:

“But they won’t please who mouth far worse

Than in the Earl of Oxford's verse.”

Prospero pointed at him and went on:

“Trust not deceivers for they may
Usurp your dukedom or your play.
He who denies a poet's name
With envy fangs a better's fame.”

He paused for effect before continuing with:

“To make my custom'd powers depart
And turn to ash my magic art
My staff I broke as I did tell.
Untie me from this island's spell -
Join hands and you will set me free
And then I can my own realm see.”

Prospero bowed slowly and, as the audience applauded, straightened up, said “ ‘But soft, methinks I scent the morning air’ ”, looked up at the first light of dawn then suddenly disappeared.