

reading of *American Psycho - The Musical*? Or the Sunday matinee when Spongebob had a major costume malfunction of his squarepants?

[The above can be customized to suit the unique history of this theater.]

And now, tonight, in this very theater . . . the stage manager tells us we have to be out in two hours.

Seriously, we got a good deal on rent but there's a guy doing an adult puppet show in the late slot, and he's already backstage and he scares me.

But fear not—although the time we have is short, the feat we will attempt is impossible. Tonight, my partners and I will attempt to capture the magic, the genius, the towering grandeur of THE COMPLETE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE!

[Assessing the weight of the book.] Now we've got a lot to get through tonight. So without further ado, I'd like to introduce an individual who knows more about Shakespeare than anyone he knows. One of *[insert name of region]*'s most preeminent Shakespearean scholars, he has a Bachelor's Degree from *[insert name of university]* and a Certificate of Completion from preminentshakespeareanscholar.com. Please welcome me in joining Mr. Jess Winfield.

[JESS enters in trendy garb and spectacles—he wants to come across as an intellectual, but he's trying a little too hard. He shakes hands with DANIEL, who hands him the book and steps far stage left to listen.]

JESS: Thank you, Daniel, and good evening, friends. *[Hugging the Complete Works book too lovingly, 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 a giant carbuncle of knowledge and understanding on the very organ of our consciousness.

DANIEL: *[At a loss for words.]* Wow.

JESS: And yet how much do we intellectually flaccid members of the Twenty-first Century appreciate the plump fruit of Shakespeare's loins?

DANIEL: Yeah—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 intelligence, and yet—if I may have just 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 takes two slow steps backward, then rushes to DANIEL in a panic.]

JESS: [*Sotto.*] We're screwed.

DANIEL: Why?

JESS: I think they know more than we do.

DANIEL: But you're an eminent Shakespeare scholar!

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

DANIEL: Then be preeminent.

JESS: Right. [*Regaining his confidence, JESS comes back downstage. To audience.*] Okay. 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.*]

JESS: [*To audience, confidently.*] Well, that seems to be separating the wheat from the chaff rather nicely. Let's see if we have any *super*-eminent Shakespeare scholars in the house. Has anybody ever seen or read *King John*? *King John*, anyone?

[ADAM, *sitting in the audience, raises his hand.*]

You have, really? Have you seen it, or read it?

ADAM: Well . . . I downloaded it.

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

ADAM: It's . . . about a hunchback?

JESS: Would you stand up, please? [ADAM rises.] My friends, *ecce homo*.

ADAM: Whoa, not cool!

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

ADAM: Well, not today.

JESS: My friends, look at this sad individual. Abandoned by our educational system, hopped up on empty gigabytes of pirated text. 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!* [*Getting really worked up.*] 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 stunted by Star Wars sequels, ravaged by Real Housewives, and bankrupted by the babbling blather of Big Brothers and Bachelorettes.

[*JESS is now ignoring ADAM, who resumes his seat. JESS is now in full-on fire-and-brimstone mode.*]

My people, I say to you, toss out your tawdry television to savor the splendors of the sonnet! Exchange the isolation of the iPhone for the 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 [*Raising the Complete Works to the heavens.*] is found in every hotel room in the world!

DANIEL: Amen!

JESS: This is my dream, friends, and it begins here, tonight. Join us in taking the first steps down the path to literary salvation . . . by texting SHAKESPEARE IS GOD to 37154. Standard rates apply. 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 and final member of our company. Please welcome to the stage Mr. Adam Long.

[*ADAM comes to the stage, carrying a smartphone. As he shakes hands with DANIEL he drops his phone, scrambles to pick it up, and starts swiping madly to find his place on the phone. DANIEL retires to his corner.*]

ADAM: [*Greets the audience.*] Hey, y'all. [*Indicating the phone.*] Okay, um . . . [*Still swiping.*] I Googled Shakespeare's life so I could tell you all the stuff he did . . . As you can see, I'm not an audience member. I totally punked you. [*Finds place on phone.*] Okay . . . sorry, new phone. [*Holds up phone for audience to see.*] The new [*name of latest flagship smartphone*] from T-Mobile, a truly tremendous device—

[*DANIEL clears his throat aggressively.*]

ADAM: Okay . . . [*Reading from phone.*] William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, War-wick-shy-ur. [*Swipes.*] The third of eight children, he was the eldest son of John Shakespeare, a locally prominent merchant, and Mary Arden, daughter of a Roman. [*Swipes.*] Catholic member of the landed gentry. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway.

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

DANIEL: Different Anne Hathaway.

ADAM: That's a shame. [*Reads.*] Shakespeare arrived in London in 1588. [*Swipes but doesn't find his place; swipes again.*] There, with his provincial charm and folksy wit, he quickly became a popular figure around the U.S. Capitol. [*Stops. Swipes back to double-check. Swipes forward again.*] After dominating Michael Douglas in a debate, winning the highest office in the land, and totally nailing his role in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* . . . [*Swipes, hesitates.*] . . . Shakespeare issued the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year's Day 1863, thus freeing the slaves. [*to DANIEL.*] I never knew that before! [*DANIEL gestures to him to wrap it up. ADAM reads rapidly.*] Although Shakespeare modernized the economy, won the Civil War, and built a transcontinental railroad, he was sadly assassinated at the Globe Theater in 1864 by an actor with a cannon. [*Swipes.*] He lies buried in a log cabin in Stratford. [*Swipes.*] Although there's also a huge monument to him at the mall. [*To audience.*] Thank you.

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

[Enter ADAM as BENVOLIO and DANIEL as SAMPSON, striking aggressive poses.]

Verona's fragile peace shall be undone,
And tragedy begin—with the biting of a thumb.

[JESS exits.]

A/BEN: [*Singing.*] O, I like to rise when the sun she rises, early in the morning.

D/SAM: [*Singing simultaneously.*] O, a sailor's life is the life for me, how I love to sail o'er the bounding sea . . .

[*They see each other.*]

A/BEN: [*Aside.*] Ooo, it's him. I'm gonna kill him, beat him up, and kill him again.

D/SAM: [*Aside, simultaneously.*] Ooo, it's him. I hate his guts. I hate his family, hate his dog, hate 'em all.

[*They smile and bow to each other. As they cross to opposite sides of the stage, SAMPSON bites his thumb at BENVOLIO, who trips SAMPSON in return.*]

A/BEN: "Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?"

D/SAM: No sir, I do but bite my thumb.

A/BEN: Do you bite your thumb at *me*, sir?

D/SAM: No sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I do bite my thumb. Do you quarrel, sir?

A/BEN: Quarrel, sir? No, sir.

D/SAM: But if you do, sir, I am for you. I serve as good a man as you.

A/BEN: No better.

D/SAM: Yes. Better.

A/BEN: You lie!"

D/SAM: Down with the Montagues!

A/BEN: Up yours, Capulet!

[They fly at each other. Massive fight scene, with intentionally lame fight choreography. JESS enters as the PRINCE.]

J/PRINCE: "Rebellious subjects!"

A/BENVOLIO and D/SAMPSON: *[Simultaneously.]* Oh no, it's the Prince. *[They kneel.]*

[DANIEL and ADAM silently mimic the PRINCE as he speaks, and poke at each other whenever they get the chance.]

J/PRINCE: "Enemies to the peace. On pain of torture,
Throw your mistemper'd weapons to the ground,
And hear the sentence of your moved prince."

D/SAMPSON: *[Mocks him, then:]* Buzz-kill.

J/PRINCE: "You, Capulet, shall go along with me.
Benvolio, come you this afternoon
To know our farther pleasure in this case."

A/BENVOLIO: *[To SAMPSON.]* Brown-nose!

D/SAMPSON: *[To BENVOLIO.]* Ass-hat!

J/PRINCE: Language!

[J/PRINCE and D/SAMPSON exit.]

A/BEN: "O where is Romeo? Saw you him today?
Right glad I am he was not at this fray.
But see, he comes!"

[DANIEL makes a grand entrance as ROMEO, wearing a 'Romeo' wig and carrying a rose in his teeth. The effect is intended to be extremely romantic. It's not.]

Good morrow, coz.

D/ROMEO: Is the day so young?

A/BEN: But new struck nine.

D/ROMEO: Ay, me. Sad hours seem long.