



Lighting the fuse

Tactics for a
meta-Shakespeare collective

Gunpowder Plot manifesto
November 2019

Bardolatry

Modern Shakespeare audiences sit in reverent submission to the Canon. This erases the culture that made the Plays possible in the first place.

If the Globe audience in 1600 had been that passive, they would have been watching medieval mystery plays, not the bawdy, violent, florid exuberance of the Elizabethan stage.

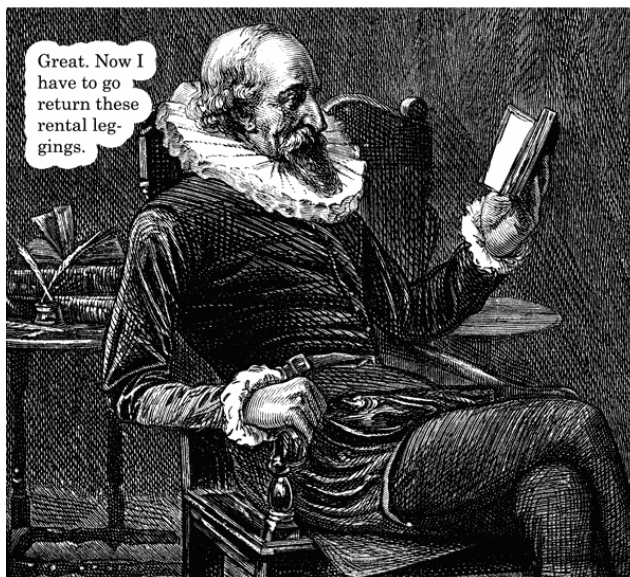
- Jocinda Davies



There's an economic reason for this cult of reverence.

Professional theater has to get paid. In this era, that means

butts in \$50 seats and donors writing checks. Affluent retirees from the suburbs are now the dominant Shakespeare demographic, and their respectful silence is deafening.





I was at a matinee of *Much Ado*, surrounded by affluent suburban retirees. It was a great show, but the audience was comatose. Beatrice and Benedick were hitting it so hard (*- I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you. - O, she misused me past the endurance of a block!*) that I started to laugh convulsively, snort-milk-out-your-nose, epileptic laughter, until I felt a hundred pairs of eyes glaring at me. *Control yourself! Can't you see we're trying to appreciate Shakespeare!* - Michael Anderson

Wittgenstein on Shakespeare



I am deeply suspicious of most of Shakespeare's admirers. I can never rid myself of the suspicion that praising him has been just a matter of convention.

The reason why I cannot understand Shakespeare is that I want to find symmetry in all this asymmetry. His plays are enormous sketches rather than paintings, as though they were dashed off by someone who can permit himself anything.

In order to enjoy a poet, you have to like the culture to which he belongs as well. If you are indifferent to this or repelled by it, your admiration cools off.



- *Culture and Value*, 1946

Theater's Bastard Children

Professional theater and the fringe try to pretend each other doesn't exist, but they shouldn't.

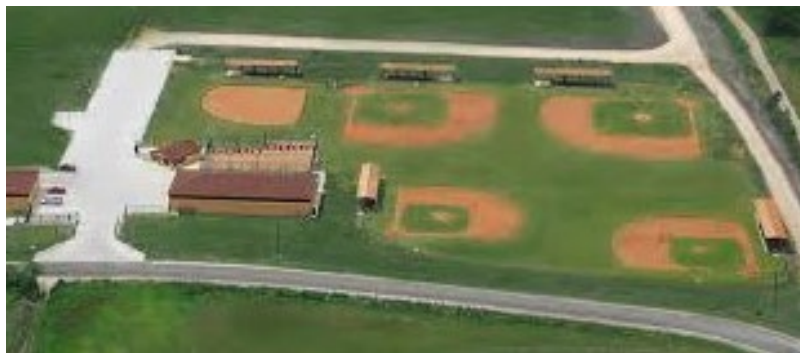
They need each other. It's the same as baseball:



The owners and the TV networks think it's about The Big Show: the huge stadiums and the top players and the glory of the spectacle. It's not. You can't have The Big Show without farm

clubs, sandlot fields, small-time ball with its rituals and organ music and ridiculous mascots. Not just to develop the talent, but to keep the culture alive, the shared experience of living inside the game.

- Roger Angell





Shakespeare's company was more fringe than Broadway. Winging their lines from cue-scrolls, competing with the bear-baiting arena next door, the manic improvisation of Will Kemp, the crowd-pleasing vamping of Burbage and Heminges.



Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them. For there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered.

Edmund could have been talking about fringe theater:

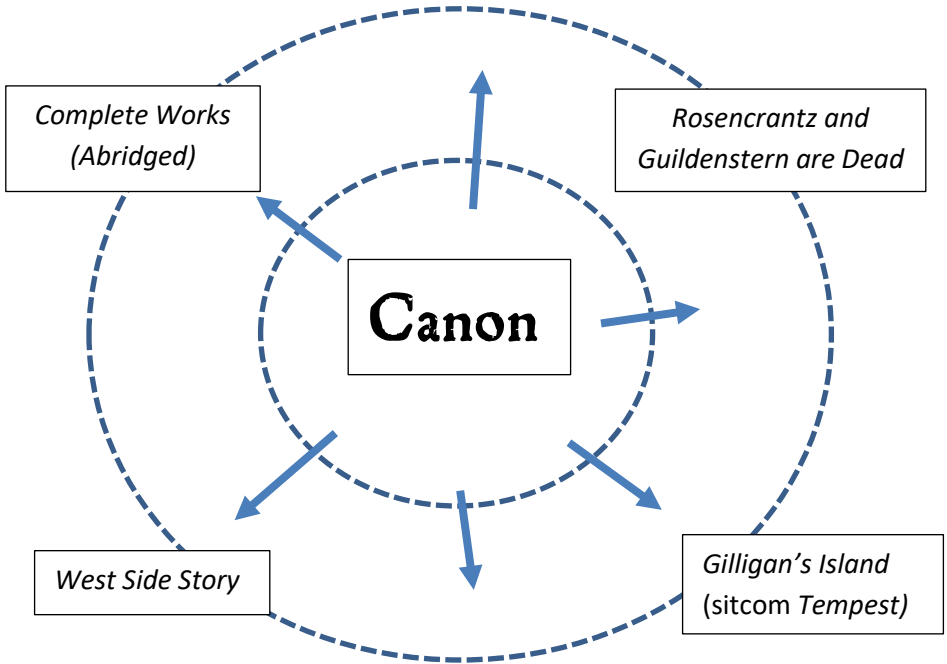
Why bastard?

*When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops
Got 'tween asleep and wake*

Fringe forces the "necessary question" from the Text to a broader argument around the Plays.

In other words: Meta-Shakespeare.

Meta-Shakespeare is what flies out from the centrifugal force of the Canon. It's the flood of thoughts that the Plays provoke, too often quarantined in directors' notes and dreary talkbacks. Even terrific meta-Shakespeare pieces like *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* or *Complete Works (Abridged)* get freeze-dried into Official Theater, when they should be starting a chain reaction.



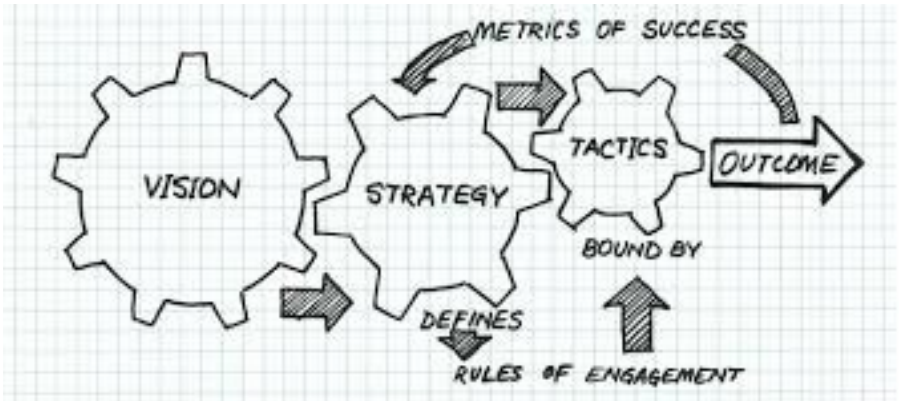
There's no point in having a Canon if you can't play inside it.

Playing around Shakespeare can make *you* look foolish, but it does no harm to the Canon.

Connecting to Shakespeare doesn't have to mean full-length productions. If you have 10 minutes of insight, don't make people endure three hours to get it. Cut to the chase.

We are performers. If we have something to say, we need to show it *in performance*, don't just leave it to the Arden footnotes.

TACTICS



Sure, meta-Shakespeare can be silly and self-indulgent. So can a lot of classical Shakespeare productions (*ahem* *looking at you, Kenneth Branagh*). But it misses the point to complain that meta-Shakespeare is weird and inappropriate. *Shakespeare* is weird and inappropriate.

If it's not, it's not Shakespeare.

Shakespeare and the dream.

*A dream is all wrong, absurd, composite,
and yet completely right: in this strange concoction
it makes an impression.*

*And if Shakespeare is great, as he is said to be,
then we must be able to say of him:*

*Everything is wrong, things aren't like that – and is all
the same completely right according to a law of its own.*

- Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

A possible playbook for a garage-band insurgency:

1) Regular open mics

Decommodify the Canon.

Periodic open mics, somewhere alcohol is served, for monologues, scenes, storytelling, argument, anyone welcome. Maybe at a big theater on a dark night - they should want this.

Audition Woodstock

Every spring, hundreds of bright young actors line up for their three minutes of audition.

It's an alienating experience. They give a private blank-verse lap dance to two or three higher-ups, and then most get the soul-crushing silence of No Call Back.

But what if these auditioners organized, did a defiant open Slam in a bar that same night, everyone belting out their audition speeches to their comrades' wild cheering, maybe in a German accent or in a yoga pose or in a Katherine Hepburn voice?

It might not take away the sting of professional rejection, but it might build a counterculture.

2) Putting up shows

*Everything depends on what
the people are capable of wanting.*

-Errico Malatesta

We shouldn't try to program a season, at least not at first. We shouldn't try to put up a show until we have a critical mass of material that HAS to be seen.

It's not about the quality of our writing and acting. We have to conjure up an audience thirsty enough to pull the Shakespeare out of us.



Some Recipes



Showcase

Mash-up

Iron Chef

Ted Talk

No Oration
without
Representation

Kaleidoscope

Iambic Fury

SHOWCASE

BOSTON MUSEUM

ACTING MANAGER Mr. R. M. FIELD

SECOND WEEK OF

J. WILKES BOOTH

THE EMINENT YOUNG TRAGEDIAN,

Who has been honored by the attendance of

 **LARGE AND ENTHUSIASTIC AUDIENCES,**
AND WILL APPEAR

This Tuesday Evening, May 3, 1864,
IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY OF

ROMEO AND JULIET!

ROMEO J. WILKES BOOTH
Mercutio..... Mr. L. K. Shewell
Benvolio..... Mr. J. Wilson
Tybalt..... Mr. J. Wheelock
Capulet..... Mr. R. F. McClannin
Friar LAWRENCE..... Mr. J. Hardenburgh
Paris..... Mr. Walter Benn
Peter..... Mr. J. H. Ring
Apothecary..... Mr. Sol. Smith, Jr
Roldanar..... Mr. T. M. Hunter
Gregory..... Mr. J. Delazo
Page..... Mrs. T. M. Hunter
Nurse..... Miss Kate Reigolds
Lady Capulet..... Miss M. Parker

DANCE ARIEL!

Miss ROSE and THERESE WOOD.

DURING THE INTERVAL,

Mr. DICKEBERG'S ORCHESTRA

WILL PRESENT THE FOLLOWING:

OVERTURE—Midnight Angel..... DICKEBERG
SELECTIONS FROM BISOPLETTI..... VERDI
ST. PATRICK'S QUADRILLE..... FALBERG
COL. CHICKERING'S BATTLE MARCH..... DICKEBERG

To conclude with the Laughable Farc, entitled

BROTHER BILL AND ME

Archibald Noelle..... Mr. R. F. McClannin
William Wiggles..... J. Wilson
Benjamin Wiggles..... W. Warren
Nathan Squibb..... Sol. Smith, Jr.
Tullywren..... Messrs. Deane and Harner
Seymour Noelle..... Miss Emily Hastings
William Noelle..... Mrs. T. M. Hunter
Martha Wiggles..... Miss Josephine Urban

WEDNESDAY EVENING.

DAMON AND PYTHIS!

DAMON..... Mr. R. K. Shewell
Pythis..... Miss Kate Reigolds

Due notice will be given of Mr. BOOTH'S appearance as "IAGO" and also of a repetition of "RICHARD III" and "THE APOSTATE."

Wednesday Afternoon—A glorious bill! "HUNTER OF THE ALPS" DANCING and "BLACK EYED SUSAN."

Seats Secured One Week in Advance.

Admission 30 Cents.....Orchestra and Reserved Seats 50 Cents

Children under 10 years of Age, 15 Cents. 1 Minute in Advance Admitted.

Exhibition Hall open at 4 1/2 o'clock... Evening Performance commencing at 7 1/2 o'clock

Afternoon Performance at 2 1/2 o'clock.

TRUMPETER..... Mr. GEO. W. BLATCHFORD

F. A. Seale, Printer, Journal Building, 119 Washington Street, Boston.

Change the way Shakespeare is consumed through horizontal organization - instead of full-length productions, do thematic showcases like *Women of Will* or *Palpable Hit*

Top Ten scenes:



SEX AND LOVE



FIGHTING



SUPERNATURAL



FUNNIEST



POLITICAL



WORST



BEST SPECIAL EFFECTS



ONE-LINE CHARACTERS

IRON CHEF



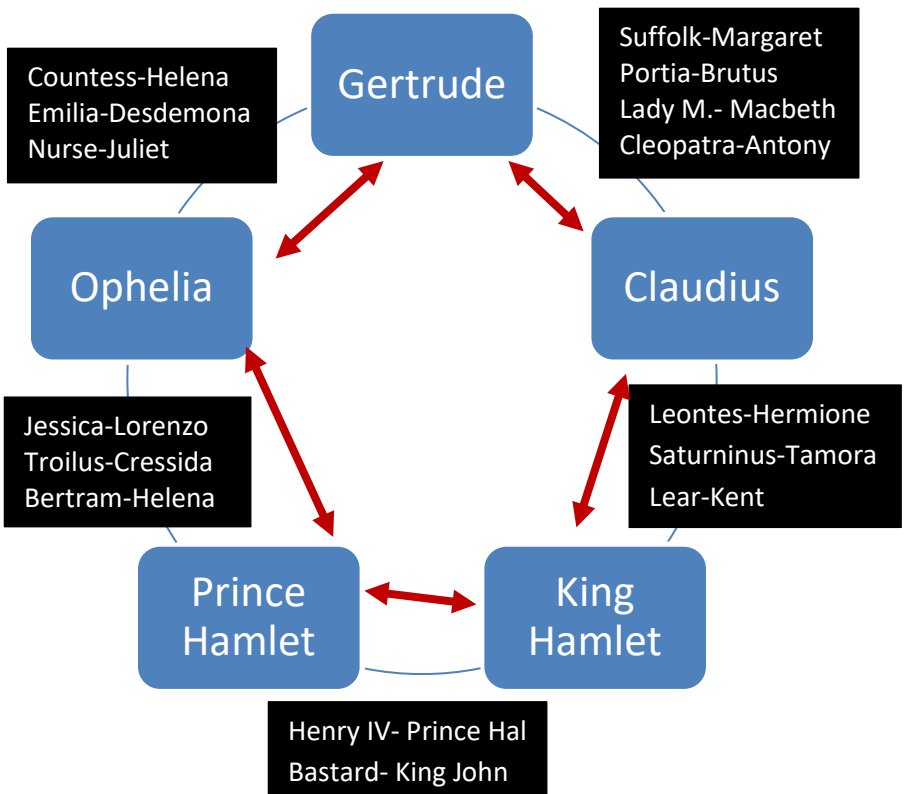
1. Get three directors
2. Give them the same five scenes
(R & J balcony scene, Julius Caesar tent scene, Lady M. and Macbeth, Olivia-Viola, Richard-Lady Anne)
3. Each directs each scene from a rotating pool of six actors, with unlimited props and tech.
4. No peeking at each others' work
5. Don't tell the audience who has directed what.
Audience votes for favorites - **BOOM**

Variation: use three fight directors, intimacy directors, or costume designers

MASH-UP

Shakespeare really only wrote four or five plays: the comedy of mistaken gender identity, the revenge play, the doomed lovers, "let's kill the king, what could possibly go wrong?" and "I'm the king but I'm gonna die and nobody loves me" – Terry Eagleton

So what if we did a 38th play, say the prequel to *Hamlet*, the back-story to Gertrude and Claudius' affair, using only speeches and scenes lifted from other Plays?



TED TALKS

There's no reason why Shakespeare commentary has to be buried in directors' notes and sleepy talkbacks. In the era of flat-screen TVs and Powerpoint, guerrilla dramaturgy is now possible *as performance*.



Imagine actors doing the best 45 minutes of *As You Like It*, punctuated by a manic dramaturg annotating as they go, a human Arden footnote, interrupting to tell the history of medieval wrestling, the Robin Hood legend, cross-dressing in Elizabethan England, the copyright suit against Shakespeare, the Puritan fear of love as a mental illness.

'Tis true that a good play needs no epilogue. Yet good plays prove the better by the help of good epilogues. What a case am I in then, that am neither a good epilogue, nor cannot insinuate with you in the behalf of a good play! I am not furnish'd like a beggar; therefore to beg will not become me. My way is to conjure you!

NO ORATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION



We need more performance about Shakespeare and disenfranchisement.

More *American Moor*,
more *Women of Will*,
more *Red Velvet*.

Theater has to win the war for diversity and inclusion - not just for social justice but for the survival of theater itself.

But too often this is an ideal we genuflect to but don't really *talk about*. It's easier to pledge allegiance to equality and justice than to face the actual battles that have to be fought.

Especially in Shakespeare. There's a loud shaming voice of White Elite Tradition in our heads that no one wants to acknowledge: *Proclaim your woke 21st Century orthodoxy all you want, but don't pretend that a 17th Century Royalist is on your side! Have you read the last scene of Taming of the Shrew? Portia's racist slam on the Prince of Morocco? Were you paying attention to Caliban or Coriolanus or Julius Caesar – where he says the proletariat deserve their bondage? Cross-gender casting might be fashionable, but you're distorting a deeply gendered text. When Benedick says "if I do not love her, I am a Jew" do you cut that line? Do you think you can wish all that away, by re-writing anything problematic as "ironic"?*



There are answers to this:
Elizabethan society was a lot more gender-fluid than you think! Black people, especially Moors, had power and respect in 17th Century Europe, more than you patronizing liberals want to admit! You can't feel the explosive humanism of the Plays without seeing that it opens a space for us! We're not here to bicker about your guilty contradictions, but to demand that our voices be heard, in this text!

This is a confrontation we should see *in performance*, not just in whispers and sanctimonious Facebook posts. As performers, we are supposed to believe that theater tells the truth better than op-eds or tedious political lectures. So why not here?

We can't liberate Shakespeare unless we are willing to *talk about Shakespeare*, the lived experience of acting, speaking and watching it in a society still dominated by a ruling elite. And we're entitled to ask, *what side are we on?*



This can't be done without meta-Shakespeare, a forum to represent human contradictions as messily and as honestly as the Plays do.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Take an play no one's ever seen, say, *Henry VI pt. 3*.
(The most underrated play in the Canon: the young Gloucester/Richard III's awakening, great battles, severed heads everywhere, Margaret at her most Cruella DeVille)

Do a campy but textually faithful version where each scene transitions through a different world of play, a different modern genre. So the audience sees that *The Godfather* and *Pulp Fiction* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Maltese Falcon* and spaghetti Westerns are all just reboots of the Henriad.



IAMBIC FURY

Was Shakespeare actually any good?

Tolstoy and George Bernard Shaw said no: they said he was a fraud, a reactionary hack who wrote tedious plots with unrealistic characters, whose legacy is a cult of pretension, a practical joke played by 18th Century German critics.

There are answers to this: defenders like George Orwell and Toni Morrison face this attack squarely. This is a debate that deserves a stage, a script, an Epic Rap Battle.

Team No

vs.

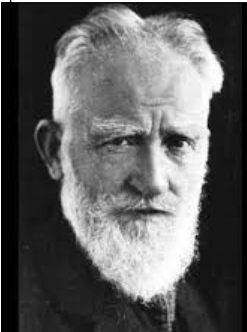
Team Yes



Tolstoy



George Orwell



G.B. Shaw



Toni Morrison



So here's what we need:

seven to seventeen Samurai

a listserv-connected collective of comrades
with no obligation beyond the occasional desire to:

write material, act, direct, stage-manage,
ally with big and small theater companies,
find venues, run open mics, publicize,
get butts in seats, get critics to review,
speak in our true voices

Do you want in?

Gunpowder Plot
guyfawkes@rcn.com