

Will

by  
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pilot first revision

IN DARKNESS, we hear faintly, a driving, somehow familiar, drum and bass line.

As the rhythmic pulse of this music builds, it is joined by foot-stamping and cheering. A massive audience going wild...

Words appear out of black...

"THE PLAY'S THE THING"

HOLD: On these words...

And then, just when we think the rhythm will explode!

HARD CUT:

INT. STRATFORD HOUSE. BEDROOM - PRE DAWN

CLOSE ON: Hands stained with ink. They hold a page of tightly spaced writing - the final page of a manuscript.

No sound but the rustle of fingers on paper.

PAN UP TO: The intense, determined, keenly intelligent, 24 year old face of: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. For Will, nothing else exists, as by candle-light, he intently reads the page.

Finally satisfied, he takes a deep breath - then ties the pages with string. A bitterly sarcastic voice cuts through.

ANN

Who will want a play by William Shakespeare?

Will's wife: ANN is there. We are in their small bedroom. Ann is dressed in her nightgown - Will in travelling clothes.

Will, a country boy, speaks with the rolling "R" accent common to the region.

WILL

I don't know - but I must find out...

Eight years older than Will, Ann is still attractive - but six years of marriage to a dreamer have made her bitter.

ANN

Must you? A player is little better than a beggar...

Will puts the play into an already packed bag.

WILL

It's a new age; in London the theaters hold thousands...

ANN

We have three children!

WILL

There's money to be made! I dream this for us.

ANN

(bitterly accusing)

No Will - your dreams are your own.

There are no words; no connection except...

HAMNET

Da...?

Will looks down. His sleepy-eyed, 6 year old son HAMNET, stands there in his nightshirt. The fight has woken him.

Forcing himself to be cheerful, Will bends and hugs Hamnet.

WILL

Good morrow, Prince Hamnet...!

Hamnet, a plaintive whisper into Will's ear.

HAMNET

Ma don't tell the stories proper...

WILL

(a comforting smile)

Ah, Then I will leave Queen Mab with thee.

HAMNET

What's she?

Will places a tiny, imaginary figure on Hamnet's palm. As Will speaks, we become aware again of that rhythm...

WILL

She is a fairy no bigger than a gnat; and night by night she creeps into boys' ears and tells stories, of... what...?

HAMNET

Dragons...?

WILL

Aye, dragons, and brave heros...  
Can you be satisfied with Mab 'til  
I return?

Hamnet considers this - then shakes his head. He looks as though he may cry. Will tries to comfort him.

WILL (CONT'D)

Now, none of this...

But Hamnet goes to Ann, and hides his face in her skirt.

CLOSE ON: Will. We see the pain this parting will bring. Finally he stands and turns to Ann.

WILL

I'll send money soon...

He tries to kiss her. She turns away, but then:

ANN

Be careful Will...

A moment between them.

WILL

I will bring fortune to this  
family; I swear it.

We hear that rhythm building again. Will, determined, picks up his bag, and leaves the room. But...

INT. STRATFORD HOUSE. HALL - PRE DAWN

In the tiny hall, Will's father: JOHN SHAKESPEARE, accosts Will with whispered, alcoholic intensity.

JOHN

*You must bear this letter to  
London! Tis for your cousin  
Southwell...*

Will, irritated, brushes past his father and down the stairs.

WILL

*Southwell's the most hunted man in  
England...*

Will's mother: MARY, a forceful middle-aged woman, waits at the bottom of the stairs. A hushed, conspiratorial fervor.

MARY

*Father Southwell's a true Catholic.*

Before Will can reply, his father thrusts the letter at him.

JOHN

Leave it with John Wilkes, at the  
Cross Keys Tavern...

WILL

I've done with politics...

John explodes with a maniacal intensity.

JOHN

This is no politics - this is your  
soul!

(then, with gentle fury)

Never forget what those Protestant  
devils did to our family. Remember  
Will; *Remember...*

CLOSE ON: Will caught in a web of guilt. An inward struggle -  
finally he takes the letter. John holds out rosary beads.

JOHN

And your rosary...

Will hesitates - his mother, a loving smile...

MARY

Take them Will. Better to die  
righteous than to burn for fear.

Will takes the rosary and along with the letter, puts them  
into a small, black, velvet bag. A final moment.

As Will turns... SUDDENLY the rhythm from the opening scene  
slams back in and the vocal stridently sings:

VOCAL (SINGS)

London's callin!

HARD CUT:

EXT. STRATFORD HOUSE - DAWN

HIGH SHOT: As the classic CLASH tune soars, Will strides away  
from the small town of Stratford and toward...

VOCAL

London's callin!

Music tumultuously builds; Day morphs to Night then Day...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LONDON - DAY

As music powers, we are hurled into the energy, noise, wealth, poverty, cruelty and grandeur of London...!

VOCAL  
London's callin!

We see Will gazing at the severed heads that gruesomely adorn majestic London bridge...

Music continues as in the markets, Will marvels at monkeys, tigers, parrots, bears and other 'wonders' from newly 'discovered' corners of the globe. There are people from Africa and the Indies. A Native American Indian is displayed in chains like a bizarre side-show exhibit...

Will watches as bodies of plague victims are unceremoniously dumped into the 'plague cart'.

Will excitedly makes notes in his notebook. He is a young artist, in the big city, for the first time.

As music fades....

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LONDON. STREET - DAY

CLOSE ON: A glistening pile of freshly harvested oysters.

A scrawny hand creeps toward them... SUDDENLY a voice calls!

OYSTER SELLER  
Get out ya filthy street rat!

PULL BACK: A burly OYSTER SELLER takes a swipe at a skinny 12yr old street kid: PRESTO. Darting out of harm's way, Presto flees through a tiny gap in two buildings and into the next street where he almost collides with Will!

Will stops. Presto, quickly assessing the situation, beams up at him.

PRESTO  
Guide sir; new in town?

With his bag over his shoulder, country clothes and inquisitive air, Will is obviously "new in town".

WILL

Yes... I mean no, I don't want a guide.

Will walks on. The narrow, crowded street feels very exotic. The air is thick with the sound of touts, hawkers, music and traffic. Presto, irrepressibly charming, follows.

PRESTO

But you must see the sights sir; bowling alleys, card dens, pistol shootin, bears ripped apart by wild dogs, your horoscope read by a blind virgin. Wiv Presto as yer guide, London's yer oyster!

Will smiles, but keeps walking.

WILL

I'm not here for the sights...

PRESTO

Then perhaps you're in London to make your fortune sir?

WILL

Yes, which means now I have none, so farewell...

PRESTO

*Sir*, I want no *money*. It makes me sick to hear you say it. But tell me, are you a man of trade sir...?  
(Will ignores him)  
A soldier then...?

Will just laughs, but then pauses, unsure of the way.

PRESTO

Where you headin' Sir? No charge.

WILL

(guarded)  
The theaters...?

PRESTO

(an excited exclamation)  
But the best theater in London's right 'ere sir! C'mon...!

He pulls Will down a side-street toward a crowd of people.

WILL

Where...?

PRESTO

Right here - it's free...!  
(dragging Will through the  
crowd)

C'mon sir - Hurry, this way! C'mon!

Will and Presto burst to the front of the crowd just as...

CLOSE ON: A bloody mess of steaming intestines are pulled from a screaming man's stomach!

CLOSE ON: Will. Shocked, he almost vomits.

We realize we are at a public execution. The crowd scream!

CROWD

Catholic! Traitor! - Dog! Die!

A pious-looking PURITAN preaches from an outdoor pulpit.

PURITAN

Almighty father bless our work!

The crowd scream hysterically. The Victim twists in agony.

CLOSE ON: Will disoriented and faint.

A JAGGED FLASHBACK:

AN EXECUTION 17 YEARS EARLIER. A middle-aged man: EDWARD ARDEN screams as the executioner slices open his stomach...

EDWARD ARDEN

God have mercy on your soul!

Will's father is amidst the screaming crowd. He holds the sobbing, traumatized, 7 YEAR OLD WILL high off the ground.

Young Will tries to turn his head away. His father hisses.

JOHN SHAKESPEARE

Watch Will; watch these devils  
murder your uncle. *Remember...*

CUT TO: THE PRESENT.

CLOSE ON: Will. He fights a rising panic...

CLOSE ON: Presto's hand snakes into Will's coat pocket...

Will REALIZES what is happening as Presto's hand emerges with the black velvet bag that contains the rosary and the letter!

Presto takes off into the crowd. Will desperately gives chase, but Presto has the advantage of his smaller size as he negotiates the forest of legs.

Will fights through the crowd - he must get that letter!

Presto bursts from the crowd. Will does so moments later. He is gaining on Presto. They are approaching a road, Will lunges - BUT Presto THROWS himself under a moving wagon!

Presto, narrowly escaping being crushed, darts down a tiny alley. Will sprints into the alley and stops. The alley is filthy and rat-infested. Will's eyes desperately hunt for Presto. And then he sees him - hiding. As Presto tries to dart past, Will grabs his arm - but Presto twists, a blade flashes and Will cries out!

Will's hand is badly cut, but he manages to disarm Presto. The knife skids into the mud.

They struggle over the bag.

PRESTO  
(an animal snarl)  
I'll kill you!

The bag rips - the rosary beads and letter fall out!

Seeing the rosary, Presto murmurs venomously.

PRESTO  
Catholic...  
(a blood-chilling scream)  
Catholic!

We see the fear on Will's face. He grabs the rosary. But Presto grabs the letter and snatching his knife, scuttles through a tiny opening in a broken fence and is gone.

Will knows the danger of being connected with that letter.

WILL  
Fuck!

He stares at the rosary beads in his badly bleeding hand. A decision; he throws the rosary into the muck, and, wrapping a handkerchief around his hand, hurries away... But then...

CLOSE ON: Will stops.

Checking that he is unseen, he hurriedly retrieves the rosary and walks quickly from the alley.

CUT TO: Presto hiding in the shadows. He has seen it all.

HARD CUT:

INT. TOPCLIFFE'S HOUSE. CHAMBER - DAY

CLOSE ON: Water being poured onto a sodden rag stuffed into a blind-folded man's mouth.

The nearly naked man: SAMUEL WARD, is pinned by two assistants, head downwards, to an inclined board. He writhes with pain and terror as he slowly drowns.

A long, long moment. The writhing increases to desperate panic, then slowly abates. Samuel Ward is dying...

SUDDENLY a tall, dark-suited man: RICHARD TOPCLIFFE rips the rag from Ward's mouth. Air rushes in, but still Ward chokes.

Topcliffe grabs Ward's hair and wrenches him from the board. Ward retches water as desperately he tries to breath.

Topcliffe whispers into his ear.

TOPCLIFFE  
Where's Southwell?

We are in Topcliffe's personal torture chamber.

Beyond terror, beyond almost, sanity itself, Ward gasps a choking prayer...

WARD  
Hail Mary full of grace...

Topcliffe yanks Ward's face toward him.

TOPCLIFFE  
God doesn't hear your Popish  
idolatry...

WARD  
I believe in the holy Catholic  
Church...

Smash! Topcliffe pounds Ward's face with a chain-mail glove. This is clearly personal. He calmly repeats:

TOPCLIFFE  
Where's Southwell?

A moment - Ward's face is now a bloody mess. He looks deep into Topcliffe's eyes, and through broken teeth murmurs.

WARD  
You will burn in Hell.

TOPCLIFFE  
Perhaps, but you will get there sooner...

Topcliffe turns coldly to his assistants.

TOPCLIFFE  
Execute him.

As Ward is dragged from the room, Topcliffe kneels before a table spread with an open bible. He prays.

CUT TO:

EXT. SHOREDITCH STREET - DAY

The driving, savagely ironic vocal of THE JAM'S post-punk anthem "That's Entertainment", punctures the sound track.

BUSKER (SINGS)  
That's entertainment!  
That's entertainment!

A BUSKER belts out the song on a guitar-like instrument.

We see Will, his hand bandaged by the handkerchief, walking through the muddy twisting streets of Shoreditch.

Shoreditch is the Wild West meets Bangkok. Home to brothels, bear baiting arenas, bowling alleys, gambling dens, pistol ranges, theaters, lodging houses and taverns: men and women of all classes are drawn to it for its entertainments...

BUSKER (SINGS)  
That's entertainment, lah...!

Will stops... At the end of the street is a sign painted on a huge wooden structure: "The Original. The Best. The Theater!"

CLOSE ON: Will. He takes a deep breath, and walks toward...

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

With a blast of heavy rock music, the theater doors open to reveal... a huge wooden amphitheater. The auditorium is open to the sky and the stage thrusts out into the audience giving the dangerous, immediate feeling of a rock concert.

A disastrous performance is in progress! The Theater is half-full, and the punks; the poor, young, sexy, men and women who drink, flirt, fight and stand in the moshpit in front of the stage, are yelling and throwing things.

Will cautiously makes his way into the theater.

On stage is: RICHARD BURBAGE. He is 26, arrogant, impossibly handsome and hugely talented, (but prone to over-act).

Despite Richard's natural charisma, the play is garbage.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Thy brow is whiter than a dove, my  
love...!

AUDIENCE

Piss off!

On stage (but off to one side), there are chairs reserved for the aristocracy. The most lavishly attired aristocrat is the vain 63 year-old: LORD HUNSDON. Beside Hunsdon sits his ravishingly beautiful, and obscenely young: MISTRESS.

The aristocrats, smoking long elaborate pipes lit by servants, are heckling the actors.

ARISTOCRAT

Stinking, vile, pig's-wallow!

In the wings: FLETCHER, the pretentious writer of this monstrosity, bawls instructions to Richard Burbage on stage.

FLETCHER

Rhythm, fuck you Richard! RHYTHM!

JAMES BURBAGE: Richard Burbage's father and owner of The Theater, rushes furiously up to Fletcher, (Burbage wears stage makeup and a King's crown).

JAMES BURBAGE

Christ Fletcher; It's a disaster!

FLETCHER

Your son's ruining my play!

Burbage, a large tempestuous man, grabs Fletcher.

JAMES BURBAGE  
I'll fucking ruin you...!

Fletcher is saved from violence by the pustule-faced, almost toothless BOXMAN, who announces to Burbage.

BOXMAN  
'Es, here...

JUMP CUT:

INT. THE THEATER. BURBAGE'S OFFICE - DAY

JAMES BURBAGE  
(apoplectic)  
You told me it was finished...!

Sitting before Burbage is superstar playwright: CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE. Marlowe is brilliant, young, arrogant, glamorous and outrageously homosexual. He has long, studiously unkempt rock-star hair and is smoking like a chimney. The noise from the rowdy audience can be clearly heard.

Marlowe blows smoke from his elegant, long-stemmed pipe.

MARLOWE  
I've been far too busy on her  
majesty's...  
(a theatrical whisper)  
secret service, to write.

JAMES BURBAGE  
Kit, please, I need a Marlowe play.

Wickedly ironic, Marlowe cocks an ear to the crowd noise.

MARLOWE  
Obviously...  
(a thorny dilemma)  
*But*, the unfortunate truth is, I am  
now bound to Henslowe of The Rose  
Theater.

BURBAGE  
Bound...?

MARLOWE  
By *exclusive* contract; Henslowe  
pays me not to write.

BURBAGE  
 (a slow horror)  
Not to write...?

MARLOWE  
 ... for anyone else.  
 (enthusiastic)  
 It's very New Age.

BURBAGE  
 New Age? I've paid you a fortune...

MARLOWE  
 But Henslowe pays me...

BURBAGE  
 (a cataclysmic explosion)  
 FUCK HENSLOWE! This is THE Theater;  
 it was the first, and I built it!  
 Without me there'd be no theater in  
 England and "Christopher Marlowe"  
 would just be another arse-fucking  
 nobody!

We expect Marlowe to react to this insult, but instead he is completely, infuriatingly, unperturbed.

MARLOWE  
 As I said; an exclusive contract.

CUT TO:

INT. THE THEATER. STAGE - DAY

The audience are growing wilder.

Lord Hunsdon, storming off stage followed by his mistress and posse of servants and sycophants, runs smack into Burbage...

LORD HUNSDON  
 You fucking fool Burbage! Do you  
 plan to play this excrement at  
 court before the Queen?

JAMES BURBAGE  
 (a grovelling bow)  
 No, I assure you Lord Hunsdon...

LORD HUNSDON  
 Do not forget your licence rests on  
my patronage!

JAMES BURBAGE  
No, your lordship...

LORD HUNSDON  
Get your house in order, or I will  
find a company worthy of my name!

As Hunsdon storms off, Burbage murmurs...

JAMES BURBAGE  
Poxy old prick...

Burbage turns to the 38 yr old, shaven-headed, demented but brilliant comedian and dancer: KEMP, (think Steve Martin meets Robin Williams on crack).

JAMES BURBAGE  
Get on stage!

KEMP  
Jesus fuckin wept!

Swearing profusely, Kemp leads the other dancers on stage.

As the musicians strike up, Kemp leads the "Morris Dance". Tattooed torsos gleaming, the dancers are a macho, leaping, foot-stamping spectacle that is part River Dance, part break-dance, part ballet and fully sick.

But it is no good. Audience yell.

AUDIENCE  
We paid for a play!!

A beer bottle is thrown at Kemp. Bad-tempered at the best of times, he jumps into the moshpit and head-butts the culprit.

KEMP  
Cunt!

As Radio Birdman's punk-rock NEW RACE powers...!

VOCAL  
Yeaaah! Really gonna punch you out!

The other dancers jump down to help Kemp, but they are outnumbered by angry audience.

Richard Burbage and the rest of the actors, (armed with swords), join the fray!

CLOSE ON: Wide-eyed Will, buffeted by the crowd!

CUT TO: A SUPER-FAST PUSH THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS OF SHOREDITCH, THAT HURLS US INTO ANOTHER THEATER AND DOWN TO...

INT. THE ROSE THEATER. BEAR CAGES - DAY

CLOSE ON: A bear ripping into a hunk of flesh.

We are in the bowels of The Rose Theater. PHILLIP HENSLOWE, a hard, jowly, eccentric kind of man, is feeding his bears. Bears are just one of Henslowe's obsessions (over time we will discover he has many others).

HENSLOWE

Russian, the king of bears... cost me a pretty penny...

With Henslowe, is son in law and lead actor: EDWARD ALLYN. Tall, imperious, Allyn has created the lead roles in all of Marlowe's hits - but there is something cold within his soul.

ALLYN

You can afford it; takings are up... Burbage hasn't had a success in months.

Henslowe speaks with self-flattering irony as he climbs a flight of stone stairs. Allyn follows.

HENSLOWE

Can't get any decent plays; seems a far superior theater owner...

ALLYN

With a far superior leading player...

HENSLOWE

Pardon, dear son-in-law - has most skillfully, and legally got all the best playwrights under contract...

As Henslowe and Allyn laugh smugly, they emerge up through a trapdoor and onto the Rose's empty stage, (the Rose is of similar size and shape to Burbage's theater).

An apprentice rushes in.

APPRENTICE

They're rioting at The Theater!

HENSLOWE  
(gleefully)  
Sport!

CUT TO:

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

The riot is in full swing. Music powers!

VOCAL  
Really gonna punch you out...!

Will, caught in the crush, has never seen anything like it.

BACKSTAGE: James Burbage, beside himself, is screaming.

JAMES BURBAGE  
They'll tear the place apart!

Burbage strides onto stage. Yelling above the din, he shows the truly powerful personality he is.

JAMES BURBAGE  
Friends! Patrons! Countrymen! Lend  
me your ears...! A word! A word!

The crowd calm enough for Burbage to be heard.

JAMES BURBAGE  
Tomorrow there will be a free  
performance for one and all!

The audience scream.

AUDIENCE  
We don't want this shit again!

CUT TO: Henslowe and Allyn entering at the back of the theater. They are darkly delighted at Burbage's predicament.

HENSLOWE  
Talentless hack...

CUT TO: The stage.

BURBAGE  
No, it's a wondrous, new play.

AUDIENCE  
Who's it by?

BURBAGE  
 (caught out)  
 Ahh...

AUDIENCE  
 Let's tear the place apart!

BURBAGE  
 (a sudden inspiration)  
 The great Christopher Marlowe!

The audience are stunned. They murmur excitedly.

AUDIENCE  
 A new play? By Marlowe?

CUT TO: Henslowe. Outraged, he turns to Allyn.

HENSLOWE  
 Marlowe is under contract to me!

An audience member excitedly calls:

AUDIENCE  
 "Holler ye pampered Jades of  
 Asia!"

The crowd cheer. Burbage booms in his best theatrical voice.

BURBAGE  
 Yes "Holler ye pampered jades of  
 Asia!" But this is even greater  
 than the great Tamburlaine.

AUDIENCE  
 What's it called?

BURBAGE  
 Ahh... Tamburlaine.... The Ghost!

AUDIENCE  
 OOh a ghost; Marlowe'd do that  
 fucken brilliant...!

BURBAGE  
 Friends, believe it! Leave us now,  
 and come again tomorrow!

The crowd are still uncertain whether to keep rioting or not.

BURBAGE  
 And free beer in the courtyard for  
 the next half-hour!

The audience rush out, and Will is carried from the theater by the sea of crowd.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE THEATER - DAY

A short time has passed. Will, in the grimy alley that runs behind The Theater, is knocking on the "stage-door".

The door is opened by Boxman. He glowers at Will through his one good eye.

BOXMAN

Whar?

WILL

I would speak with master James Burbage...

Suddenly Richard Burbage, holding a handkerchief to a cut above his eye, appears at the door.

RICHARD BURBAGE

You're speaking with his son.

WILL

(pushing through nerves)  
I have a letter of introduction  
from Master Roland Gibbs esquire -

RICHARD BURBAGE

Never heard of him.

WILL

He owned the theater troop I played  
with and...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Where did you play?

WILL

The Warwickshire region... mainly.

RICHARD BURBAGE

*Warwickshire!*

Richard laughs and turns away. Will is desperate.

WILL

And I've also written a...!

Richard is slamming the door, but Henslowe and Allyn appear and force their way through the doorway and into the theater.

HENSLOWE  
 (to Richard)  
 Out of the way boy!

Richard, startled, hurries after them.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 Wait! Get out! Boxman!

Will is left standing there alone. A moment. He tries the door. It is unlocked. He hesitates, then slips inside.

INT. BACKSTAGE CORRIDOR - DAY

Will walks through the dirty, backstage corridors marvelling, awestruck, at the stage machinery, props, costumes...

He opens a door, and unexpectedly finds himself on stage.

CLOSE ON: Will. Struck by the sheer power and majesty of standing on that vast stage, he whispers:

WILL  
 How many civil towns had stood  
 untouched  
 That now are turned to ragged heaps  
 of stones?  
 How many people's lives might'st  
 thou have saved,  
 That are untimely sunk into their  
 graves...

Will is startled by an amused female voice.

ALICE  
 Bravo...

Will turns to see ALICE BURBAGE looking at him from the side of the stage. 21 years old, and Burbage's daughter, Alice is quite simply, the most beautiful creature Will has ever seen.

WILL  
 (caught out)  
 Ahh..., sorry... hello.

ALICE  
 Who are you?

All Will can do is stammer...

WILL  
Um, no-one...

ALICE  
Well Mr No-one, what are you doing  
on my father's stage parroting  
Marlowe?

WILL  
Your father's...  
(then, a new thought)  
It's not... Marlowe.

ALICE  
(surprised)  
Really..., Peele?

WILL  
No...

ALICE  
Greene?

WILL  
No...

ALICE  
Then who?

WILL  
(a tiny smile)  
No-one...

ALICE  
(intrigued)  
No-one...?

WILL  
(modest)  
No-one yet...

ALICE  
Yet. It seems this no-one, desires  
to be someone...

INT. THE THEATER. BURBAGE'S OFFICE - DAY

HENSLOWE  
Marlowe is under contract to me!

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 (to Allyn)  
 Marlowe needs a new muse; thinks  
 you're getting stale Ned...

ALLYN  
 Stale! Your last performance stank  
 like rotting pork left in the...!

BANG! Before the words are out of Allyn's mouth, Richard has punched Allyn in the face. Allyn, shocked, screams.

ALLYN  
 I'll kill you!

Allyn is launching himself at Richard but James SLAMS a broadsword (obviously a prop), onto the table.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Get off my property before I run  
 you through as trespassers! Boxman,  
 escort these *gentleman* out.

A tense standoff. Henslowe speaks with chilling malevolence.

HENSLOWE  
 You haven't heard the last of this  
 Burbage - Come on Ned.

Escorted by Boxman, they leave.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 I showed them...

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Idiot!

Burbage yells.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Full company on stage now!

INT. THE THEATER. STAGE - DAY

The company, assembled on stage, are an eclectic family of actors, stagehands and musicians. They range from teenage boys who play the female parts, to ancient character actors.

Some sport shaven heads, others exotic tatoos. They remind us more of a rock band than a theater company.

Will stands unnoticed with Alice.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Tomorrow the masses will expect to  
 see Marlowe's newest masterpiece...

KEMP  
 That was a brilliant fucken plan...

Cantankerous old character actor: BARNABY SMITH pipes up.

BARNABY  
 We're fucked...!

Alice steps forward.

ALICE  
 Father...

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Quiet Alice...

ALICE  
 But father...!

JAMES BURBAGE  
 SHUT UP!  
 (to the company)  
 Fletcher has a new play - we'll  
 pass it off as Marlowe's...

There is uproar from the company.

KEMP  
 No-one'll believe his dog's-vomit  
 is Marlowe!

FLETCHER  
 How dare you...!

Will suddenly leaps forward.

WILL  
 I have a play!

All look to Will.

BURBAGE  
 Who are you?

CLOSE ON: Will, suddenly very nervous.

WILL  
 William Shakespeare.

BURBAGE  
Never heard of you...!

Burbage turns away, but Will presses on.

WILL  
I'm an actor and...

BURBAGE  
I'm not hiring actors!

WILL  
(passionately)  
And my play's called Edward the  
III...!

Fletcher groans pretentiously.

FLETCHER  
God, a history play...! I have an  
enchanted idyll set on the  
mythical island of Iona-ay...

KEMP  
(furiously)  
It's shit like that, that got us  
into this mess in the first place!

Will yells desperately.

WILL  
Mine's about an heroic English  
King! And Edward his son; the Black  
Prince!

The company members are caught by Will's passion.

WILL  
There's love, war, death and  
betrayal...!

KEMP  
What about comedy?

WILL  
Um..., the Scottish characters are  
quite funny...

KEMP  
(intense)  
Yeah Scots are funny.

BURBAGE

What happens in the end?

WILL

The English king triumphs over the  
deceitful French...

Kemp, upbeat, glances to Burbage.

KEMP

Everyone hates the French.

Young Richard Burbage excitedly shouts.

RICHARD

I'll play the Black Prince!

Suddenly everyone is talking at once.

KEMP

I'll do the funny Scot!

ALL

What about battles? Music? Etc...!

BURBAGE

Silence!

Burbage snatches Will's manuscript. We read the strengths and weaknesses of Will's early work on Burbage's face as he 'speed murmurs' through the pages.

BURBAGE

Yes..., no..., not bad... No...,  
no..., nooo..., Maybe...

CLOSE ON: Will. An agonized hope.

Burbage finishes the last page. Intense silence; then he delivers his appraisal:

BURBAGE

A piece of shit!  
(beat)  
But we can make it work...

FLETCHER

But...!

BURBAGE

(to Will)  
You and Fletcher can rewrite while  
we rehearse.

(MORE)

BURBAGE (cont'd)  
 (thunders to the company)  
 WE HAVE A PLAY!

The company cheer...

CUT TO: Will speechless, overjoyed.

BURBAGE  
 (a self-absorbed murmur)  
 I'll do the King myself...

INT. PRIVY COUNCIL CHAMBER. PALACE - DAY

WALSINGHAM  
 Our Queens life is in danger!

A sumptuously decorated palace chamber. Seated around a massive polished table we find the members of the Privy Council; the executive government of England.

WALSINGHAM, an intense, dapper, grey-haired man, is the Queen's spy-master. He urgently speaks:

WALSINGHAM  
 The murderous Pope tells all  
 Catholics that it is no sin to kill  
 the Great Satan that rules England;  
 and the Catholic priest and poet  
 Robert Southwell continues to stir  
 up rebellion with his propaganda,  
 printed on secret presses, right  
 here in London...

Walsingham throws a sheaf of pamphlets onto the table.

WALSINGHAM  
 In this New Age, men of words are  
 to be feared! Mr Topcliffe, when  
 will you capture Southwell?

Topcliffe speaks as smoothly as a serpent.

TOPCLIFFE  
 When God allows it; which is why I  
 must again draw the council's  
 attention to these so-called  
 theaters; they are snares set by  
 the devil to catch souls...

Lord Hunsdon, James Burbage's patron, reacts with outrage.

LORD HUNSDON

Always this; we are speaking of our  
homeland's security...!

TOPCLIFFE

God will grant us victory only if  
we are righteous - the theaters  
must be closed once and for all!

Hunsdon, a seemingly innocent enquiry.

LORD HUNSDON

You wrote a play at the university  
did you not Mr Topcliffe?

This is a very sore point with Topcliffe; Hunsdon knows it.

TOPCLIFFE

A work of moral guidance; but the  
theater goer is deaf to  
morality...!

WALSHINGHAM

Enough! Mr Topcliffe; find  
Southwell, and find him now!

EXT. STREET - DAY

Presto runs along a narrow, muddy street dodging wagons,  
water carriers, horses, and pedestrians.

He slithers down a filthy alley so narrow his skinny body can  
barely navigate it, and, with the agility of a rat, climbs  
the side of a house to its second storey window.

INT. BROTHEL. UPSTAIRS ROOM - DAY

Presto enters through the window. A young woman sits at a  
dressing table applying make-up. APELINA, (Presto's sister),  
is 19 and beautiful, but there is a brittle weariness to her.

APELINA

Get anything?

Presto, excitedly coming toward her.

PRESTO

A treasure...

APELINA

Give it...!

With great reverence, Presto hands the letter to his sister. She looks at it, dumbstruck, then angry:

APELINA

You frog-mouthed little light-head,  
what the fuck's this?

Apelina goes to rip it open.

PRESTO

No!

Presto snatches the letter back just as the door bursts open and a middle-aged, heavily made-up woman: DOLL, enters.

Seeing Presto, Doll stops, annoyed.

DOLL

What's he doin here?

Presto hides the letter.

APELINA

He won't be stayin...

DOLL

My French fanny he won't! Your  
regular's here, get downstairs  
- and get rid of rat-face!

Doll slams the door and is gone. Apelina mutters.

APELINA

Bitch of a cow...

PRESTO

You won't need her soon. This  
letter's Catholic; it's worth gold  
to the right hand. I'll take it to  
Lord Topcliffe himself...

APELINA

(a look of fear)  
They say that man's the devil...

PRESTO

(a sly smile)  
I cut him.

APELINA

Who?

PRESTO

The Catholic. Topcliffe will love me for that. He'll pay gold for this treasure. And then you can quit this place dear sis, and not be so afflicted of your tiredness.

Apelina considers this fantasy. Then, a cruel admiration.

APELINA

You cut him?

PRESTO

I cut him deep.

INT. THE THEATER. STAGE - NIGHT

CLOSE ON: The cut on Will's hand is making it difficult for him to write.

Rehearsals have stalled. Will works at a small table that has been set up on stage. Fletcher hovers over him.

The actors wait. James Burbage calls from downstage.

JAMES BURBAGE

We don't have all night!

As Will, still in pain, quickly finishes writing, Fletcher plucks the page from the desk and takes it to Burbage.

FLETCHER

I've improved it...!

Downstage, Burbage and the actors rehearse the new lines. As Will re-ties his makeshift bandage, Alice sits next to him.

ALICE

(picking up the pen)  
You need a scribe...

Will, a surprised look.

ALICE

(a breezy anger)  
Yes, I am that most useless of creatures; an educated woman. It seems that women are only good for ruling the nation, rearing children and whoring - I have yet to decide which path I will choose...

Will, a little shocked, doesn't know what to say.

ALICE  
 (a wicked smile)  
 I am yours: dictate.

Will, struck by inspiration, smiles.

WILL  
 A'right; the first battle scene...

CUT TO:

INT. MARLOWE'S APARTMENT. - NIGHT

CLOSE ON: Words being written onto a blank sheet of paper:  
 "The Jew of Malta"

PULL BACK: Marlowe, pen in hand, sits at a desk in his small but exotically appointed apartment.

A moment, Marlowe writes again; then intones grandly...

MARLOWE  
 Machiavel begins...

Marlowe pauses, waiting for inspiration. A long moment. He waits. And waits. And waits... Then suddenly exclaims...

MARLOWE  
 Fuck this; I need a drink!

He throws down his pen, and strides from the room.

CUT TO:

INT. THE THEATER. STAGE - NIGHT

Richard Burbage is bellowing out a speech. He is ridiculously loud, and his overly emphatic hand gestures make the speech look forced and artificial.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 How many civil towns had STOOD  
 UNTOUCHED!  
 That now are turned to ragged HEAPS  
 OF STONES?!  
 How many people's lives MIGHT'ST  
 THOU HAVE SAVED!  
 THAT ARE UNTIMELY SUNK INTO THEIR  
 GRAVES!

ALICE

(whispers to Will)

When he gets excited he saws the air like he's chopping wood - I call him "the carpenter" - he thinks it's a compliment...

Will smiles at Alice's joke, but we can see that he is disturbed by the way Richard is mangling his words.

DISSOLVE TO:

It is dinner break. CECILIA BURBAGE, James Burbage's wife, is serving food to the company. Wives and girlfriends eat with their partners. Kids run about.

AGUSTINE PHILLIPS: Actor and head musician, is playing his fiddle. An arrestingly beautiful melody fills the air.

Kemp and old Barnaby Smith are drinking heavily.

Richard Burbage is laughing with the 26yr old, sweet-natured actor AUTOLYOCUS BREWIT. They sit with BILLY COOPER, the 16yr old, handsome but girlish youth who plays female parts.

Will approaches Burbage, who is hurriedly learning his lines.

WILL

Mr Burbage..., sir.

BURBAGE

(distracted)

What?

WILL

I was wondering... how much I was to be... paid.

BURBAGE

Paid?

WILL

For my play.

BURBAGE

Play?

(shaking the pages)

Tis is no more than the gizzards of a duck after the dog's been at 'em!

Will is taken aback - but he speaks with resolve.

WILL  
Tis not perfect - but methinks tis  
worth payment.

JAMES BURBAGE  
When tis perfect, then, you will  
have payment!

WILL  
(intense)  
I need to be paid; I have  
responsibilities!

JAMES BURBAGE  
And you think I fucken don't...?

Before Will can reply, Burbage strides away.

Angry, Will turns to find Burbage's wife Cecilia, standing there with a plate of food. Cecilia is early forties and very beautiful. She has a warmth that is immediately attractive.

CECILIA  
(handing him the plate)  
Welcome Master Shakespeare. I am  
Cecilia Burbage. My husband tells  
me you are a great find.

WILL  
(doubtful)  
Does he?

Cecilia an enigmatic smile.

CECILIA  
We would all like to strangle my  
husband at one time or another -  
but we need him. He is in terrible  
debt. If the play fails he will be  
dragged off to prison - and all  
these families will starve.

WILL'S POV: One of the actors sits laughing and eating with his wife and small son who is about the same age as Hamnet.

CECILIA  
We all look for great things  
tomorrow. I'm sure you will not  
disappoint us...

CLOSE ON: Will. He realizes for the first time the massive responsibility of the position he has found himself in.

INT. SIMON FORMAN'S CONSULTING ROOM - NIGHT

HENSLOWE

(intense)

Does Burbage have a Marlowe play?

We are in astrologer and doctor, SIMON FORMAN'S consulting room. Specimen jars, books, and exotic medical equipment line the walls.

With his large head and small body, Simon looks rather like a Hobbit. But he is a brilliant and charismatic man.

SIMON

(a long suffering sigh)

Philip...

HENSLOWE

Yes or no?

Simon makes swift calculations on his astrological chart.

SIMON

The signs are unclear.

HENSLOWE

I must know...!

SIMON

Ask Marlowe yourself...

HENSLOWE

He cannot be found!

(a dark intensity)

How long 'til Burbage is ruined...?

SIMON

Enough...

HENSLOWE

You are my doctor!

SIMON

I am also your friend - and I tell you this obsession must end!

(handing him a cup)

Drink some wine.

HENSLOWE

(bitterly)

Is that your prescription?

SIMON

Yes. Then go home to your wife.  
She loves you.

HENSLOWE

(a sudden sadness )  
Yes; she does.  
(a moment - then)  
Another loved me once - before  
Burbage stole her...

SIMON

That is history...

HENSLOWE

(jabbing his temple)  
But it plays and plays, and will  
not stop!

Simon looks at his friend with a mixture of disapproval and  
pity. Henslowe, a new and furtive request.

HENSLOWE

I have heard there are incantations  
that will make a man fall sick...

SIMON

(a sharp horror)  
Phillip!

HENSLOWE

I'm asking...!

SIMON

That is not medicine; that is the  
devil!

HENSLOWE

Then the devil, take me; for I,  
will, ruin, that, man.....

CUT TO:

INT. TAVERN - DAY

MARLOWE

(an awestruck whisper)  
He can raise him...?

A private "snug booth" in a rowdy tavern. Marlowe sits drinking with the tall, white-bearded, sunken-eyed, DR JOHN DEE. Mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, navigator, alchemist and occultist, Dee is a mystical and marvelous man.

DEE

The devil may take many forms...

MARLOWE

But he can raise him...?

A voice cuts through...

KELLY

I can...

We realize there is another man sitting at the table. EDWARD KELLEY. Kelley has a brutish, dangerous quality - and disturbingly, both his ears have been amputated.

Marlowe's expression is sceptical, but his hands shake as he leans toward Kelley.

MARLOWE

You, can raise, the devil...?

Kelley just looks at Marlowe.

MARLOWE

I don't believe you.

KELLY

Tis safer that way...

Kelley stands; Marlowe is suddenly desperate.

MARLOWE

Wait! Tell me more...

Kelley looks down at Marlowe with frightening arrogance.

KELLY

Take another drink Mr Marlowe; tis not yet time for you to know...

HARD CUT:

INT. THE THEATER - NIGHT

JAMES BURBAGE

NO!

The actors, Will and Fletcher all stand on stage looking at Burbage. It is very late, and things are not going well.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 (to Fletcher)  
 What can we do?

FLETCHER  
 I'll write a stirring speech for  
 the Black Prince...

Kemp, half-drunk, yells furiously.

KEMP  
 Too many fucken speeches already!

FLETCHER  
 Then I'm sure our young protege can  
 think of something...

The whole company turn expectantly to Will.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Yes?

Will is like a deer caught in a spotlight. His mind is blank.

WILL  
 Ahh... Well...

Will desperately searches for an idea. But he has nothing. He gives a humiliated, apologetic shrug.

BURBAGE  
 Christ!

Fletcher, smug, steps forward and takes control.

FLETCHER  
 I didn't think so; as I said...

BUT SUDDENLY Will cuts Fletcher off.

WILL  
 Perhaps the French could be  
 attacked by birds!

FLETCHER  
 Birds?

Will, feverishly excited, is swept up in his own imagining.

WILL

Yes vultures, or Ravens, as if...  
as if their refusal to recognize  
Edward as king, has upset nature!  
Inexplicably the sky darkens, the  
Ravens circle, the French panic and  
the out-numbered English win!

FLETCHER

Ridiculous!

But suddenly young Richard Burbage exclaims.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Brilliant!

JAMES BURBAGE

Yes... Yes it's brilliant!

Will excitedly goes to Alice, and as he dictates, she writes.

CLOSE ON: Alice. She glances admiringly toward Will.

CUT TO:

INT. TOPCLIFFE'S HOUSE. DRAWING ROOM - NIGHT

TOPCLIFFE

(a dark excitement)

The theater?

Presto sits on Topcliffe's floor eating ravenously. Topcliffe holds the letter Presto stole from Will.

PRESTO

Come to make his fortune, he said -  
(vicious)  
He was Catholic, so I cut him - cut  
his hand, deep.

TOPCLIFFE

You have served God well.

Hiding his excitement, Topcliffe nods to a waiting attendant.

TOPCLIFFE

Show him out.

As Topcliffe turns away, Presto a sudden desperation.

PRESTO

Stay sir!

Irritated by this impertinence, Topcliffe turns slowly back.

PRESTO

I beg thee sir, for my pains sir,  
some... gold...

TOPCLIFFE

Gold? Thou hast had thy meat; what  
woulds't thou have with gold?

PRESTO

Well, I... my sister sir she...

TOPCLIFFE

(sharply)  
She is virtuous?

PRESTO

(quickly)  
Yes sir.

TOPCLIFFE

Then virtue is its own reward. When  
thou hast more information - then  
we will speak more of gold.

PRESTO

(heartbroken)  
But...

The attendant roughly hauls Presto out the door.

PRESTO

But sir! Your Lordship!

The door slams. Presto is gone. As Topcliffe again devours  
the letter, focus on Presto's meal, half eaten, lying on the  
floor.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE THEATER - NIGHT

JAMES BURBAGE

Look to your parts everyone;  
tomorrow we continue early!

Burbage sweeps away with Cecilia and Alice in tow.

We are outside The Theater. Boxman is locking up.

Kemp turns to old Barnaby Smith.

KEMP

Let's get shit-faced...

As the company disperse, Will hovers uncertainly. Obviously he has nowhere to go. Richard approaches; an amused smile.

RICHARD BURBAGE

Birds... We have not been formally introduced...

(a small bow)

Richard Burbage.

WILL

William Shakespeare.

Richard gestures to the pleasant-faced Autolycus.

RICHARD BURBAGE

And this ugly arse is Autolycus Brewit, the second best actor in the company...

AUTOLYCUS

In thy dreams dick-wit...!

RICHARD BURBAGE

Come drink with us.

WILL

I have to do tomorrow's changes...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Do them later...

WILL

Tis already late...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Then do them early.

(an enticing intensity)

We must live fast, die young and leave a pox-ridden corpse...!

SLAM CUT:

INT. BOAR'S HEAD TAVERN - NIGHT

The rowdy, crowded, smoky, late night Boar's head tavern is going off! Musicians bash out a raucous number.

Will sits at a corner table with Richard and Autolycus. Richard, already tipsy, is holding forth.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 Henslowe is trying to ruin us, but  
 we don't need his poxy playwrights,  
 (pointing to Will)  
 we have you!

A voice cuts through.

ALICE  
 Aye that we do!

A young man slaps Will on the back. Will does a double take.  
 The young man is Alice dressed in men's clothing.

WILL  
 (stating the obvious)  
 You're dressed as a man...

ALICE  
 That I am good sir!

Tipsy, Autolycus is unable to hide his affection for Alice.

AUTOLYCUS  
 Methinks thou art a pretty fellow.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 (to Autolycus)  
 Sodomite...

ALICE  
 (to Will)  
 Tis easier to go abroad at night  
 like this.

Playing it up, Alice calls to a waitress.

ALICE  
 Ale wench!

The waitress grits her teeth and calls back.

WAITRESS  
 A moment *Alice*...

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 (to Will)  
 My acting tis far greater than  
 Allyn's. Speak truth, tis great,  
 tis not?

WILL  
 (diplomatic)  
 Great? Yes...

Alice is watching Will intently.

WILL  
 Perhaps even a little... too great.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
Too great; how?

WILL  
 (nervous)  
 Well, ah, when actors, *act* they...  
 Hold up a mirror to, *nature* - as it  
 were...

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 A mirror up to *nature*...?

ALICE  
 (wickedly)  
 As opposed to carpentry...

WILL  
 So that audiences can recognize  
 themselves on stage... Most  
 audiences are common...  
 (Will, a realization)  
 like me; so if you're too great,  
 the audience will be confused...

A moment, then, slowly...

RICHARD BURBAGE  
That's my problem; I'm too great!  
 You are a genius Will Shakespeare!

As music powers!

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Music continues as, drunk as lords, Will, Richard, Autolycus  
 and Alice, dance through the streets yelling and singing.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
 Fuck Marlowe; WE'VE GOT WILL SHAKE-  
 SPEARE!

Richard's triumphant "spear shaking" to demonstrate the might of Shake-Speare, degenerates into an hilarious, drunken mime of masturbating a huge penis.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
WE'VE GOT WILLY WANK SPEARE!!

Will is a little embarrassed, but Richard is so drunkenly funny that he can't help but laugh.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
WILLY WANK SPEARE and BIG *DICK*  
BURBAGE; the two new cocks of the  
London stage!

A IRATE WOMAN calls from a window.

IRATE WOMAN  
People are sleeping!!!

RICHARD BURBAGE  
Not anymore they're not!

AUTOLYCUS  
(laughing)  
Little Dick, will get us arrested!

RICHARD BURBAGE  
Big Dick cares not!  
(to Will)  
We're brothers now. You will write  
the greatest parts this world has  
ever seen, and I will illuminate  
them by holding the mirror up to...  
what was it?... Nature! Together we  
will achieve greatness...  
(looking to the sky)  
It is written in those stars Will;  
I see it, I SEE IT...!!!

SUDDENLY! The sound of SOLDIERS running toward them.

SOLDIER  
Who goes there!

ALICE  
The watch!

They all run. The soldiers give chase.

SOLDIER  
Halt!

Alice slips, Will catches her before she falls.

Richard and Autolycus turn back, but the soldiers can be heard approaching. Alice whispers to Richard and Autolycus.

ALICE

Go!

Moments before the soldiers appear, Alice impulsively rolls over a low, stone wall, pulling Will with her into a garden.

As the soldiers pass, Will, lying on top of Alice, is forced by Alice to lie very still to avoid detection.

It is fun, sexy, and romantic.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE THEATER. BACKSTAGE. CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Lighting the way with a lantern, Richard and Alice lead Will through The Theater's warren of backstage corridors. They are all still tipsy.

WILL

No need to trouble thyselfes.

ALICE

Shhh... you saved my life...

WILL

(embarrassed)

No...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Thou art a gentleman Sir Will...!

INT. THE THEATER. COSTUME ROOM - NIGHT

CLOSE ON: A sumptuous fur trimmed cloak as Richard ostentatiously spreads it on the floor.

WILL

A king's cloak is too fine a bed  
for this poor poet...

RICHARD BURBAGE

Then become a better poet - and  
earn thy bed...

DISSOLVE TO...

LATER: Will lies alone and happy, on an huge pile of cloaks and other rich costumes.

PUSH IN: On Will. He murmurs with contented amazement.

WILL  
A day of wonders...

Will sleeps.

INT. UPSTAIRS ROOM. BROTHEL - NIGHT

Presto slithers in through the window. Angry, almost in tears, he paces the room, muttering.

PRESTO  
Fuckin old piss-breath, I'll fucken  
kill 'im! I'll kill 'im!

Then, anger suddenly gone, he slumps to the floor, defeated.

Suddenly, the sound of voices and feet on the stairs. Presto, rises for the window, but then, realizing as the door cracks open that he is too late, he slides under the bed.

PRESTO'S POV: From under the bed he can see his sister's feet, and another male pair of feet.

He hears a man's voice, thick with alcohol.

MAN  
Disrobe, thy dirt-some punk...

As Presto sees Apelina's dress fall to the floor, he looks sharply away.

CLOSE ON: Presto. The unbearable pain on his face as he hears the weight of bodies shifting on the bed above him...

The man, his breath heavier, faster now...

MAN  
Come, commodity, show thy worth...  
Yes, oh yes... thou art a pretty  
slut...

Presto draws his knife. Follow the dull glint of the blade. It moves to his inside arm. The skin is crazed with wounds, some fresh, some old. Slowly, deliberately, Presto carves the point of his knife across his arm.

As the blood lightly flows, the pain comes - blocking out sound, blocking out memories, blocking out everything...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TOPCLIFFE'S HOUSE. DRAWING ROOM. - NIGHT

It is very late. Marlowe, smoking and sipping from a flask, looks like he has been summoned from some debauched party.

Topcliffe obviously despises Marlowe; but he needs him.

TOPCLIFFE

(brandishing the letter)  
It is to Southwell; from his  
'*supporters in Warickshire*'. The  
courier is from one of the theaters  
- it surpriseth me not...

MARLOWE

Yes, those places are full of  
drunkards, degenerates, whores and  
spies;  
(dripping with irony)  
I find it so hard to fit in.

TOPCLIFFE

This is no jest! Whoever was  
carrying the letter could lead us  
to Southwell...

MARLOWE

Then they are a valuable prize...  
my creditors, you understand?

TOPCLIFFE

Find him, and you'll be paid well;  
search the theaters for someone  
newly arrived from Warwickshire -  
with a gash on their hand....

SLAM CUT:

EXT. PUBLIC SQUARE - DAY

CLOSE ON: Intestines being ripped out... The victim screams with mortal agony. The camera shifts: Will is being executed!

CLOSE ON: Will sits up, terrified... we realize we have been watching his nightmare.

Heart pounding, disoriented, Will turns, then cries out...!  
EDWARD ARDEN, the uncle whom young Will saw executed, is  
sitting beside him.

Will is scared. But it is clear from his reaction, that this  
is not the first time this has happened.

WILL  
(a whispered terror)  
What do you want...?

Edward sits impassively.

WILL  
Go away...

As Edward speaks, he does not look at Will.

EDWARD  
What do you seek?

The unexpected question confronts Will.

EDWARD  
She is beautiful... but you already  
have a wife.

WILL  
(sharp, involuntary)  
I know that...! I..., I do this for  
my family; all of them.

EDWARD  
For yourself...

There is no reply. Will cannot completely deny this fact.

EDWARD  
God gives us rules; not choices...

WILL  
Is it such a sin to want to be...,  
*something*...?

Will breaks off. Closing his eyes he tries to shake the  
terrifying image of Edward from his consciousness.

But when he opens his eyes... Edward is still there.

WILL  
Please... I must do this...

EDWARD  
Remember the true faith Will...

For a moment Will does not respond. Edward repeats, harshly:

EDWARD  
*Remember...!*

Then more gently...

EDWARD  
Remember...

Will knows it is no use resisting.

WILL  
Yes...

He takes out the rosary beads. Edward, a final whisper...

EDWARD  
*Remember...*

And Will, as he has done so many times before; prays.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE THEATER. COSTUME ROOM - MORNING

CLOSE ON: Will asleep. A long peaceful moment.

And then Alice rushes frantically into the room.

ALICE  
Will...! Will!

Will doesn't stir. She shakes him. Groggy, he opens his eyes.

WILL  
Wha...?

ALICE  
Father needs the play for the  
censor!

Will sits suddenly upright...

WILL  
Oh God...!

But then stops very still. He has a raging hangover.

WILL  
Ooooh, God...

CUT TO: Alice's POV: Will still clutches the rosary beads.

Realizing that Alice is staring at the beads, Will hastily tucks them away. An awkward moment.

Before either of them can speak, Burbage bursts in.

JAMES BURBAGE  
I need the play!

INT. MASTER OF REVELS DRAWING ROOM - DAY

SIR EDMUND  
Really Burbage, tis not yet noon!

Burbage has woken: SIR EDMUND TILNEY, Master Of The Revels and the Queen's chief censor. Attended by a servant, Sir Edmund wanders in wearing a nightshirt and yawning.

JAMES BURBAGE  
Forgive me your lordship; permit me  
to offer this tiny consideration...

Burbage holds up a bulging leather purse. Sir Edmund waves his assent as he sits in an armchair.

SIR EDMUND  
What's the matter...?

JAMES BURBAGE  
A very high-minded play - a brave  
English King slaughtering French  
Catholic fops.

SIR EDMUND  
A Protestant English king?

JAMES BURBAGE  
(carefully)  
Ah, Methinks during the reign of  
Edward the third, our true English  
religion was..., undiscovered...

Sir Edmund murmurs to a servant.

SIR EDMUND  
Bring me a pot...

As the servant fetches a pot, Burbage continues.

JAMES BURBAGE

But in his heart I'm sure that King  
Edward was devoutly Protestant!

Sir Edmund is no fool. He murmurs dryly.

SIR EDMUND

Continue...

JAMES BURBAGE

King Edward begins:

As Burbage begins to read, Sir Edmund raises his nightshirt  
and a servant places a chamber pot under his arse.

JAMES BURBAGE (READING)

Robert of Artois, banished though  
thou be  
From France, thy native Country...

As Sir Edmund settles onto the pot, he stops Burbage again.

SIR EDMUND

Wait. Who's it by...?

INT. MARLOWE'S APARTMENT - DAY

HENSLOWE

Marlowe...!

Henslowe and Allyn burst into Marlowe's room; he is asleep...

HENSLOWE

... thou false villain...!

SUDDENLY: In a fluid, surprisingly deadly movement, Marlowe  
sits up in bed and levels a pistol at Henslowe's chest.

HENSLOWE

(stops, scared)

Christ Kit, what are you doing!

Seeing who the intruders are, Marlowe lowers the pistol and  
relaxes back into a dreadful hangover.

MARLOWE

Oooh, Fuck... What do you two want?

Henslowe's anger quickly reignites.

HENSLOWE

You are under contract to me!

Allyn, an actor's insecurity.

ALLYN  
How could you have written a part  
for *Burbage*...?

Suffering terribly from his hangover, Marlowe roars:

MARLOWE  
Shut up!

He prods a lump in the bed beside him.

MARLOWE  
Get me a smoke...  
(there is no reaction)  
Slovenly wench, hurry up!

With much grumbling, a naked young man gets out of bed and heads in search of Marlowe's pipe.

Embarrassed, Burbage and Allyn don't know where to look.

CLOSE ON: Marlowe. A world-weary sigh as he gazes toward the young man.

MARLOWE  
Tobacco and boy's arses - the only  
two things that keep me sane...

Rousing himself, Marlowe turns to Henslowe and Allyn.

MARLOWE  
Now; what's the matter...?

SLAM CUT:

INT. THE THEATER. BURBAGE'S OFFICE - DAY

CLOSE ON: Marlowe, furious.

MARLOWE  
You said it was my play?

Marlowe and Burbage are arguing in Burbage's office. Burbage is already wearing his performance make up.

BURBAGE  
I paid for a Marlowe play!

MARLOWE  
But I didn't write you one!

BURBAGE

After the performance I'll call you on stage and you can say it was written by a disciple of yours. Do it and I'll wipe your debt. I could sue you, you know.

A moment. Marlowe considers.

MARLOWE

First I want to meet this "disciple..."

INT. THE THEATER. BACKSTAGE - DAY

CLOSE ON: Will. He peers through a spy-hole into the already packed and rowdy auditorium. Alice is beside him.

WILL

What if they don't like it?

ALICE

(mater of fact)

They probably riot, burn the place down and we'll all be killed.

WILL

Oh God...

As Will and Alice turn, we see that the backstage area is in uproar. Half-naked actors go over their lines, practice sword fights, and make last minute preparations.

16 year Billy Cooper, half in, half out of his costume (a long woman's dress), rushes up to Will waving a script page.

BILLY

I can't read this...!

Boxman drags along behind Billy trying to do up the dress.

BOXMAN

Careful; this pretty gown will be ruined!

WILL

(peering at Billy's page)  
Presence...

BILLY

Oh! "Royal presence..."

Will turns; Autolycus is there.

AUTOLYCUS  
Will what...?

But Autolycus is cut off by Richard

RICHARD BURBAGE  
Will, a word...

But Richard is cut off by a frantic stage-hand.

STAGE HAND  
When does the smoke come?

Before Will can answer, he is startled by furious yelling.

KEMP  
DIE YEA ENGLISH BASTARDS!!!

Kemp, sounding like a drunk, demented Billy Connolly, is getting into character by ranting in a thick Scottish accent.

The stagehand yells urgently at Will.

STAGE HAND  
Master Shakespeare; the smoke!

WILL  
(blank)  
Smoke?

Alice gently reminds Will.

ALICE  
For when the Ravens appear...

WILL  
Ah! When the French King says: "A sudden darkness hath defaced the sky..."

Richard draws Will aside and frantically whispers.

RICHARD BURBAGE  
What am I holding the mirror up to?

WILL  
Nature...

RICHARD BURBAGE  
Yes; nature!

Suddenly a boy runs in waving a sheet of paper.

BOY  
The horoscope!

Giving the boy a coin, Alice takes the page and jumps up on a bench, calling urgently:

ALICE  
Quiet everyone, let us see if we  
shall have success today!

All stop what they are doing and gather around Alice. Their faces are intense - they obviously take this very seriously.

ALICE  
Will first; what's your sign?

CLOSE ON: Will. But before he can speak a voice cuts through.

MARLOWE  
So here is the imposter...!

All turn. Standing there with Burbage, is Marlowe.

BURBAGE  
Will, this is Christopher Marlowe.

Will is speechless - Marlowe is his hero.

WILL  
Ah..., Will, William Shakespeare;  
an honor...

MARLOWE  
(arrogant, ironic)  
It seems your play is quite the  
thing...

WILL  
(stammers)  
A very poor thing, compared to your  
great works...

MARLOWE  
Indeed...

As all look on, Marlowe imperiously holds out his hand. Will nervously passes the bundle of pages he holds to Marlowe...

CLOSE ON: Marlowe notices the bandage on Will's hand.

As Marlowe eyes the bandage, Fletcher whispers egregiously.

FLETCHER

His writing is very rough; I shaped  
it as a master tailor would...

Marlowe rudely cuts Fletcher off and speaks to Will.

MARLOWE

What happened to your hand?

WILL

(suddenly uncomfortable)  
I, ah... slipped.

MARLOWE

How long have you been in London  
Master Shakespeare?

WILL

Not long...

MARLOWE

(a spider to a fly)  
No, not long at all...

Something about Marlowe's tone makes Will very uncomfortable.

MARLOWE

By your accent; Warickshire?

WILL

(intentionally vague)  
From thereabouts.

Marlowe smiles, his suspicions confirmed.

MARLOWE

Then welcome to London Monsieur  
Shakeshaft - I predict your stay  
will be... profitable.

HARD CUT:

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

CLOSE ON: A burning wick.

With a thunderous ROAR, cannons EXPLODE and the play begins!

EXT. THE THEATER - DAY

Marlowe emerges from the stage-door. Furtively he motions to a street kid loitering with other kids in the alley.

As the kid approaches, Marlowe whispers intensely.

MARLOWE

You know the house of Richard  
Topcliffe?

KID

Yes sir.

MARLOWE

(giving the kid a coin)  
Tell him to come quickly! Marlowe  
has what he seeks - understand?

KID

What he seeks; yes Sir.

MARLOWE

Go!

As the kid sprints away...

DISCOVER: Presto hidden behind a barrel...

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

The audience laugh uproariously as Kemp, playing the Scottish King David, (complete with ridiculous Scottish accent), rushes around the stage in cowardly panic.

KING DAVID

Dislodge, dislodge! It is the king  
of England.

Autolyocus plays Scottish Douglas, (also with comic accent).

DOUGLAS.

Jemmy, my man, saddle my bonny  
black!

BANG! In their Keystone Cops' panic, Douglas and King David slam into each other, fall down, and then try and get up. It is an hilarious, ball-grabbing, farting, Jim Carrey meets Will Ferrell, irresistibly funny routine!

The punks who mosh in the pit, scream with laughter.

The Aristocrats, who sit smoking on the side of the stage, chuckle indulgently.

Lord Hunsdon, sitting beside a new, young, beautiful mistress; is enjoying that others are enjoying the show.

CUT TO: Will peering at the audience from backstage. A smile.

CUT TO: Marlowe watching impassively from the wings.

CUT TO: In the audience. Henslowe and Allyn sit stony faced.

ALLYN

Vile, low humour...

EXT. STREET - DAY

The kid arrives outside the gate to Topcliffe's city mansion. A moment. A servant appears, then shakes his head. The kid sits and waits.

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

The mood on stage has changed. The Countess (Billy), is defiant, as King Edward (James Burbage), tries to seduce her.

COUNTESS

It is their lives that stand  
between our love,  
That I would have choked up, my  
sovereign.

KING EDWARD

(cautious)  
Whose lives, my Lady?

COUNTESS

(strong)  
Your wedded Queen, my liege,  
And Salisbury, my wedded husband,  
Who living, have that title in our  
love,  
That we cannot bestow but by their  
death.

The Countess' words have stopped the King like a slap.

KING EDWARD.

Thy opposition is beyond our Law.

COUNTESS.

So is your desire!

A murmur ripples through the audience. Someone yells:

AUDIENCE

Yeah, tell the old lech!

For a moment Hunsdon, (sitting beside his young mistress), tenses. But then he smiles and nods with hypocritical sagacity. The other Aristocrats follow suit.

BACKSTAGE: Alice and Will exchange a relieved look.

CUT TO: Marlowe watching from the wings. A thoughtful frown.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Topcliffe arrives home with his retinue. The boy runs up to him. Topcliffe launches into action.

INT. THE THEATER. BELOW STAGE - DAY

In the cramped confines below stage, two spluttering stage hands frantically fan smoke up through a trap door...

On stage. Smoke billows. The French army are in panic. Autolycus plays French Prince Phillip.

PHILLIP

A flight of ugly ravens  
Do croak and hover o'er our  
soldiers' heads,  
Fly, fly, there is no hope but  
death!

EXT. STREET - DAY

Topcliffe and six soldiers gallop furiously through the street!

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

Richard (as Prince Edward), is ranting in his usual high octane style to his father King Edward (James Burbage).

PRINCE EDWARD

And here, with HUMBLE DUTY, I  
PRESENT

(MORE)

PRINCE EDWARD (cont'd)  
 This sacrifice, this FIRST FRUIT OF  
 MY SWORD!

It is a battle scene; "dead soldiers", gory with pig's blood, litter the stage. On stage playing a soldier, Will desperately tries to catch Richard's eye to remind him to be more "natural". But Richard is oblivious.

PRINCE EDWARD  
 Cropped and CUT DOWN EVEN AT THE  
 GATE OF DEATH!!

Richard's style, even though pushed, suits the loud scene. The punks in the moshpit at the front of the stage cheer!

AUDIENCE  
 Down with the French faggots!

CUT TO: The wings, Fletcher whispers to Marlowe.

FLETCHER  
 "Gate of death" is my line. All the  
 good bits are mine.

Marlowe mutters acerbically.

MARLOWE  
 You couldn't write this well if I  
 stuck a hot poker up your arse.

Looking toward Will on stage, Marlowe whispers enigmatically.

MARLOWE  
 Traitorous, Catholic, dog...

CUT TO: Henslowe and Allyn in the audience. They are furious that the play is going so well.

ALLYN  
 It's not Marlowe; not his  
 greatness...

HENSLOWE  
 But it's some prick who can  
 write...

CUT TO: Will rushes off stage to grab a prop sword. Alice is there. She can barely contain her excitement.

ALICE  
 They love it!

Will is forcing himself to be calm.

WILL

It's not over yet; Richard still  
has his final speech...

EXT. STREET - DAY

Topcliffe and soldiers spur their horses toward The Theater.

CUT TO:

INT. THE THEATER. STAGE - DAY

It is the final scene. The atmosphere on stage is now sombre. The actors play an exhausted but victorious army. That special kind of hush you sometimes get, grips the theater.

Richard as Prince Edward walks to the front of the stage.

Will, on stage as a soldier, is apprehensive; surely Richard will blow it. And of course, Richard thunders the first line.

PRINCE EDWARD

How MANY CIVIL TOWNS...!

Will winces, bitterly disappointed. But then, curiously, Richard stops. As if suddenly remembering, he turns toward Will and holds his hand before his face like a looking glass.

Richard and Will's eyes connect. A smile. The enigmatic gesture creates a strangely powerful moment.

The audience are rapt as Richard turns back to them and continues more softly, connecting deeply with the emotion.

PRINCE EDWARD

How many civil towns had stood  
untouched  
That now are turned to ragged heaps  
of stones?  
How many people's lives might'st  
thou have saved  
That are untimely sunk into their  
graves?

CUT TO: A young punk at the front of the stage. Deeply moved, he comments to his friend.

PUNK

Yeah, war; fucken waste in'it?

CUT TO: The Stage. Will beams toward Richard.

The audience are silent as, like the true showman he is, James Burbage delivers the final lines of the play.

KING EDWARD

God willing, then for England we'll  
be shipped;  
Where in a happy hour, I trust we  
shall arrive,  
Three kings, two princes, and a  
queen!

Cannons ROAR, and the crowd GO WILD!!

Fireworks explode! Musicians strike up a driving tune, and Kemp and the other dancers run on stage for the Morris dance!

Burbage runs off stage and calls to Boxman.

JAMES BURBAGE

Get down there and earn your keep!

EXT. THE THEATER - DAY

Topcliffe and soldiers clatter to a halt outside The Theater!

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

Boxman in the crowd, hectors cheering audience to drop a coin into the slot of the large wooden box he carries.

BOXMAN

Carn; it's worth a penny!

ON STAGE: The beaming Will, Richard, Kemp, Burbage and the rest of the cast take their bows in front of the rapturous audience. Burbage calls on Marlowe. He quiets the crowd.

MARLOWE

Thank you, gentles all! But I must  
inform you that this afternoon's  
trifle was not written by myself -  
but a young upstart, a mere pup -  
give your hands to the whelp;  
master Will Shakeshaft!

Grimacing at the not so mistaken pronunciation of his name, Will steps forward to receive the audience's applause as...

Topcliffe and soldiers burst through The Theater's doors!

TOPCLIFFE'S POV: The two thousand audience wildly cheer Will and the actors on stage.

CLOSE ON: Topcliffe assessing the situation. He has no idea who he has come to arrest. He has only six soldiers and the possibility of the crowd turning against him is very real.

MARLOWE'S POV: Topcliffe standing at the back of the theater.

CLOSE ON: Marlowe. Marlowe's eyes flick to Will as he takes his bows. As part of his stage-costume, Will wears gloves that cover his bandaged hand.

Marlowe, a decision. Catching Topcliffe's eye across the sea of audience, he nods toward the wings and walks off stage.

Fletcher, who waits in the wings, whines as Marlowe arrives.

FLETCHER

You said you were going to call me  
on stage - I wrote it with him!

The backstage area is dark.

CLOSE ON: Marlowe. He smiles sweetly

MARLOWE

I have a far greater role for you  
to play...

Fletcher looks at Marlowe, a slow smile.

MARLOWE

(gently)  
Give me your hand...

Fletcher extends his hand. Marlowe clasps it tenderly, turning it palm up, then...

SUDDENLY! Marlowe SLASHES Fletcher's palm with his dagger! Fletcher's scream is masked by the still cheering crowd.

FLETCHER

Christ - what have you done!

MARLOWE

(a genuine sadness)  
We all must suffer for greatness;  
one way or another...

FLETCHER

Degenerate lunatic!

Marlowe pulls out a handkerchief.

MARLOWE

Let me bandage it for you...

FLETCHER

I'll kill you for this! I..., I...  
 (Fletcher, feeling faint)  
 I feel, I've got to... sit...

Marlowe grabs Fletcher's hand and roughly wraps the handkerchief around it, as... Topcliffe and the soldiers appear out of the gloom.

Fletcher, suddenly aware of what is happening screams.

FLETCHER

No!

MARLOWE

(urgently to Topcliffe)  
 He struggled; the wound opened...  
 get him out of here!

FLETCHER

I've done nothing! No! NO!!

Marlowe turns and strides onto stage. As the audience raucously applaud, Marlowe embraces Will, who has been oblivious to what has been going on backstage.

CUT TO: Topcliffe and the soldiers dragging the screaming Fletcher out through the backstage area.

CRANE UP: Crouched like a pigeon, high up in the rafters of the backstage area, is Presto. He has seen it all...

They arrested the wrong man. And Presto knows it...

CUT TO: On stage. As Marlowe embraces Will, he shouts.

MARLOWE

You owe me your life Master  
 Shakespeare!

High on applause, Will has no idea what Marlowe means.

WILL

Then the debt is small; for I am  
 but born this moment!!!

MARLOWE

A debt, nonetheless... a debt.

Will does not hear this last remark over the applause. From this image of triumph...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BOAR'S HEAD TAVERN - NIGHT

The full company pack the tavern. They celebrate, smoke, dance and drink as the musicians belt out a tune!

Will laughs with Richard and Autolycus as Marlowe holds court

MARLOWE

Holler ye pampered jades of Asia!

Alice sits beside Will and whispers to him.

ALICE

There's talk Marlowe is responsible for Fletcher's arrest...

WILL

(shocked)  
Marlowe? How...?

ALICE

London is dangerous, people are not always as they seem.

CLOSE ON: Will. This pricks his conscience. He slowly speaks.

WILL

Alice, I... There's something I must tell you...

Alice, for once letting her guard down, meets his gaze.

ALICE

Yes Will...

For a moment Will is lost in her eyes. But then, forcing himself to continue, he opens his mouth to speak, but...

Suddenly James Burbage lurches into frame and plucks Will from his seat.

JAMES BURBAGE

Here's the fucker!

Burbage draws Will aside and shoves a coin-stuffed purse into his hand.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 (a meaningful look)  
Responsibilities...

Before Will can reply, Burbage yells to the crowd.

BURBAGE  
 Quiet if you please! Quiet!

Hauling Will to stand beside him on a stool, Burbage speaks.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 Lord Chamberlain's Men, tonight we  
 christen a new member of our  
 family: spear carrier and sundry  
 player, Will Shakespeare!

As the company raucously cheer their approval, Burbage  
 'christens' Will by pouring a cup of ale over his head. Will  
 laughs as he is drenched. Then Burbage, a more serious tone.

JAMES BURBAGE  
 And perhaps soon, he may grace us  
 with more of his words; the play's  
 the thing Will...

WILL  
 (beaming)  
 Yes sir; the play's the thing...

As the company cheer, HOLD on Will. Reality can wait until  
 morning. He has finally found home, and he is happy...

SLAM CUT:

INT. TOPCLIFFE'S HOUSE. CHAMBER - NIGHT

CLOSE ON: The horrifying image of Fletcher choking. Water is  
 being poured onto a sodden rag stuffed into his mouth.

TOPCLIFFE  
 (a terrifying whisper)  
 Where's Southwell?

SNAP TO BLACK

END OF EPISODE