

Shakespeare's
Mid-Winter's
Nightmare



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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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*To high school English teacher
Ms. Joan Harrell
who gave me
so much support and encouragement.*

Shakespeare's Mid-Winter's Nightmare

COMEDY. What starts as a dream quickly turns into a nightmare when Shakespeare, sick in bed and suffering from writer's block, is visited by some of his most famous characters including Hamlet, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Puck, and Romeo and Juliet. The characters try to help Shakespeare decide if his next play should be a comedy or a tragedy, but they soon find themselves competing for Shakespeare's attention and title of most tragic character. However, even these demanding characters are no match for the ultimate shrew, Shakespeare's wife, who is determined to cure him in time to attend the King's winter ball.

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

Characters

(6 M, 10 F, 1 flexible, opt. extras)

(With doubling: 4 M, 8 F)

ANNE

SERVANT GIRL

SHAKESPEARE

OPHELIA

ROMEO

JULIET

OEDIPUS

HAMLET

WITCH 1, 2, 3

LADY MACBETH

PUCK

MASQUERADE DANCER 1, 3: Female.

MASQUERADE DANCER 2: Male.

DOCTOR: Flexible.

EXTRAS (Optional): As additional Masquerade Dancers.

Parts Doubled:

OPHELIA/MASQUERADE DANCER 1

ROMEO/PUCK

JULIET/MASQUERADE DANCER 3

OEDIPUS/DOCTOR

HAMLET/MASQUERADE DANCER 2

Setting

Flats can be painted to look like the inside of a 16th-century home with a coat of arms, rustic furniture, beamed walls, and a wood floor. If there are budget constraints, a simple all-black background will suffice.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Sitting room, Shakespeare's home.

Scene 2: Shakespeare's bedroom.

Scene 3: Shakespeare's bedroom.

Scene 4: Shakespeare's bedroom.

Scene 5: Shakespeare's bedroom.

Props

Bed

Rubber eyeball

3 Masks, for Dancers

Jar of leeches

For goodness sakes,
a hundred years from now,
no one will even remember
or care about
the plays of William Shakespeare!

—Anne

Scene I

(AT RISE: *Sitting room, Shakespeare's home. Enter Anne, Shakespeare's wife, and a Servant Girl.*)

ANNE: Well, this is just typical of William! We receive an invitation to the social event of the season, and he's piled up in the bed like a bag of turnips. He doesn't fool me a moment! He's doing this just to spite me. A terrible fever my –

SERVANT: Yes, milady.

ANNE: Oh, there's no doubt that he's feeling under the weather. But it's nothing more than the sniffles. I'm sure that if I had the same affliction, I wouldn't be wallowing around in the bed making excuses for myself. I'd still be up and about attending to my wifely duties and running this household. Men are so pathetic that way. So much as a sneeze, and you'd think that he's coming down with the plague. He needs to get up and move about. That's the best thing for him.

SERVANT: But, milady, the Doctor said that he had a dangerous fever and needed to stay in bed.

ANNE: Well, of course that's what he recommends. He profits off of others' illness. (*Sighs.*) It just figures that I finally get a little payoff for all my suffering and neglect, and William has to ruin it for me.

SERVANT: Yes, mistress. It would be disappointing to miss out on the King's winter ball. But I am sure that Lord Shakespeare would understand if you went alone.

ANNE: (*Sarcastic.*) Oh, yes, that would make for a lovely evening! It would be a never-ending barrage of inquiry: "How is William doing? We are so worried! What would we do without Shakespeare? He is so important to the London Theater." (*She begins pacing, weeping, and feeling sorry for herself.*) It's not fair. He's always locked away in his

room, writing his stupid little plays. What about me? Does he care that I am left to run this household all alone? No, all he cares about is himself. His plays don't even have to be of quality anymore. If a play is written by the *great* William Shakespeare, it is guaranteed to be all the rage and bring them flocking to the theater.

SERVANT: His plays are very good. I heard the new one is going to be a comedy.

(Anne rolls her eyes and lunges aggressively at the Servant.)

ANNE: Well, it's more likely to be a tragedy. He's made himself sick trying to one-up himself. *(She turns around and begins to pace again.)* I'd love to finally see him fall flat on his face. Maybe then, he will forget all about this ridiculous playwriting and we can have a respectable life. For goodness sakes, a hundred years from now, no one will even remember or care about the plays of William Shakespeare!

SERVANT: Yes, milady.

ANNE: Let's go see if the nurse has prepared his tonics. We still have a couple of days. Maybe the fever will break soon. I've told the doctor to be ready with the leeches. *(Anne exits.)*

SERVANT: I don't think there's much of anything for the leeches to feed on. Milady's been sucking the blood life right out of Lord Shakespeare.

ANNE: *(Offstage, shrieks.)* Sara!

SERVANT: *(Calls.)* Coming, milady! *(Exits. Blackout.)*

Scene 2

(AT RISE: *Shakespeare's bedroom. Shakespeare is in bed SR. Moaning, he tosses and turns and then sits up. Weeping is heard offstage.*)

SHAKESPEARE: *(To himself.)* What the dickens! *(Calls.)*
Hello, who's there? *(Ophelia enters SL. She appears to be soaking wet. She wrings water out of her hair and then pulls out grass from her hair.)* How now, fair maid? What brings you here to my fretful dreaming?

OPHELIA: Oh, woe is me. I am Ophelia. I am tragedy. My boyfriend in rejection said: "Get thee to a nunnery!"

SHAKESPEARE: Oh, sweet Ophelia. *(Laughs)* You? A nun? A beauty such as yourself! I dare say that would be a tragedy.

OPHELIA: *(Sarcastic.)* Yes, it was much less tragic that you wrote that I drowned myself in an adolescent fit of hysteria.

SHAKESPEARE: It was a bit of an overstatement. But the loss of a promising young life is a true tragedy. *(Pause)* This is a strange dream that you should visit me now. I cannot decide the nature of my next play. Are you my muse called forth in my fever to end my writer's block?

OPHELIA: *(Crying.)* I don't know! Why is everyone always asking me such complicated questions? Why can't it be enough that I am pretty?

(Romeo and Juliet enter SL, swigging down poison and brandishing daggers.)

SHAKESPEARE: But soft, it is Romeo and Juliet! How now, young lovers?

ROMEO: Oh tragedy, woe to me. I lost my true love, my Juliet.

(Romeo and Juliet step away from each other with their inner arms outstretched to one another.)

JULIET: It was a silly feud between our families, the Montagues and the Capulets, at the center of our tragedy.

ROMEO: *(Dramatic.)* It was their absurd hatred that brought grief and misery upon both our houses...

JULIET: *(Matter-of-fact.)* And resulted in a botched fake murder-suicide scheme for me and Romeo.

SHAKESPEARE: *(Weeping.)* That is so tragic. The plight of star-crossed lovers doomed by fate...it is just so sad! Oh, I have told many great tales of tragedy. *(Ophelia and Romeo and Juliet are also sobbing. Oedipus enters SL, walking as if he is blind.)* But, anon, over here, King Oedipus? But you are from the great Greek tragedies. I have not written of you. Perhaps I shall write of you next.

OEDIPUS: Anon, I am tragedy. I murdered my father and married my mother.

ROMEO: What? That doesn't even make sense! It's like saying I am my own grandpa.

(Shakespeare gets out of bed. He paces as he talks and contemplates.)

SHAKESPEARE: Yeah, perhaps your tale is *too* tragic.

(Oedipus approaches Shakespeare and gets down on his knees.)

OEDIPUS: *(Dramatic.)* Oh, foolish pride, I could not see with open eyes.

SHAKESPEARE: *(Annoyed, not looking at Oedipus.)* Yes, yes, you are most tragic.

OEDIPUS: *(With great expression.)* I gouged out my own eyes.

SHAKESPEARE: We get it, a victim of cruel circumstance and fate. The self-mutilation was a bit over the top, but that's to be expected from a Greek tragedy. The world is full of

tragic tales of woe! And your story, Oedipus, is just kind of...gross. Perhaps my next play should be a comedy.

(Annoyed, Oedipus gets up and stumbles off SR.)

OEDIPUS: *(As he exits.)* A re-make is never as good as the original anyway. You are nothing more than a second-rate hack compared to the great Greek poets!

(Shakespeare and the others ignore Oedipus. Hamlet hesitantly enters SL and then runs off. Finally, he comes out on stage after running off a couple of times. Everyone watches him curiously.)

SHAKESPEARE: How appropriate for you to appear in my time of indecision, Prince Hamlet.

HAMLET: To be or not to be...a tragedy?

OPHELIA: Oh, you are tragedy, all right! That's my good-for-nothing boyfriend. He was always like, "I love you, Ophelia," no wait, "I hate you, Ophelia," "Oh, go jump in a lake, Ophelia."

HAMLET: Yeah, sorry about that, Ophelia. But how was I supposed to know that you'd take me literally?

(The other characters take offense and boo and hiss.)

OPHELIA: Well, I might have made a bad decision, but at least I made one.

HAMLET: *(Whines.)* Hey, it wasn't entirely my fault. I thought that the ghost of my father was trying to tell me to murder my uncle because my uncle had murdered my father and married my mom. But I wasn't sure if my ghost dad was for real, and it all became very confusing, and the longer I waited to make a decision, the worse it all got, and...

ROMEO: Wow, dude. You and that Oedipus dude had some dysfunctional families, no doubt!

JULIET: Yeah, we thought we had it bad! Perhaps we were a bit hasty with the poison and the dagger. It makes you wonder what would have happened if we had held off on the whole marriage and "till death do you part" stuff.

ROMEO: Yeah, I was a real player before I met you, babe. I had a new girlfriend every week. I probably would have dropped you like a sack of potatoes when the next sweet young thing caught my attention.

JULIET: Hey, wait a minute, Mr. Conceited, you weren't my only suitor, Mr. Player. I'm sure I would have gotten tired of your whole "I'm so hot" big-headed attitude, dude.

HAMLET: See... (*Indicating the fight between Romeo and Juliet*) ...this is why I didn't have time for a girlfriend. I had all these family issues to try to resolve. It was like, I should kill my uncle; no, I shouldn't kill my uncle. And to make things worse, the whole time my girlfriend was always nagging at me, "What are you thinking, Hamlet? Don't you love me anymore, Hamlet? Do I look fat in this dress, Hamlet?"

OPHELIA: Oh, that's right. You're still trying to shift the blame. Well, newflash! Nobody cares anymore, Hamlet. That was so last year, and we're all dead now anyway.

HAMLET: Yeah, I suppose. But I'd like to know how you would have handled things if you were being stalked by the ghost of your murdered father.

OPHELIA: Well, how would you have handled it if your true love killed your father?

HAMLET: Sure, beat that dead horse. You know it was an accident. If he would have minded his own business, he would have been fine.

SHAKESPEARE: All right, now you all are giving me a headache.

OPHELIA: So, Willie, what's it going to be? When this fever breaks, will you take up your pen for comedy or tragedy?

SHAKESPEARE: Well, that is the question. Hmmmm, I think that I should sleep on it awhile.

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*(Shakespeare lies back down in bed and snuggles under the covers.
The other characters walk over to the head of the bed and watch
Shakespeare. Blackout.)*

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Shakespeare's bedroom. Shakespeare is in bed and Romeo, Juliet, Ophelia, and Hamlet are standing near his headboard. A loud commotion is heard offstage L. Lady Macbeth stumbles out SL followed by Witch 1, 2, 3, who are pushing and poking her until she reaches the foot of the bed.)

WITCH 1, 2, 3: *(Chant.)* Bippity, bobbity, boo, hoo, hoo!
Villainess, villainess, you shall now be one of us.

LADY MACBETH: Leave me alone, you crazy old bats! I already told you. I am not a villain. I am a tragic character... *(Indicates the other characters.)* ...such as these young kids here.

SHAKESPEARE: It's getting a bit crowded in here. Please keep it down, ladies. I need my rest.

WITCH 1: *(Ignoring him.)* Wicked is as wicked does.

ROMEO: What?

(Romeo and the other characters move in to join Witch 1, 2, 3 and Lady Macbeth at the foot of the bed CS.)

LADY MACBETH: Oh, pay them no mind, child.

(Lady Macbeth goes over and pushes Juliet out of the way and cozies up to Romeo. The Witches shuffle after her.)

WITCH 1, 2, 3: *(Chant.)* Liar, liar, pants on fire!

LADY MACBETH: I was the original desperate housewife who befell a most tragic and ill-fated end. These evil minions of Hecate tricked my husband into false ambitions. I was nothing more than a dutiful and devoted wife who felt obligated to help him take his rightful place as king.

(Lady Macbeth holds her hand out. Witch 2 places an eyeball in Lady Macbeth's outstretched hand.)

OPHELIA: Like, gross! Is that an eyeball?

LADY MACBETH: *(Calls to Oedipus offstage.)* Oh, Oedipus, I have a surprise for you!

(Lady Macbeth throws the eyeball up in the air and catches it. Witch 1 grabs the eyeball.)

WITCH 1: You are always tempting the Fates.

WITCH 3: Even the blind can see the truth here, sweetie! She ain't no victim or some kind of tragic figure. Girl, please! She's a stone-cold killer. *(She pushes Juliet back over toward Romeo.)* I wouldn't let her within ten feet of my man.

(Enamored with Lady Macbeth, Hamlet approaches the Witches and Lady Macbeth.)

HAMLET: *(To Witches.)* Why don't you back off! *(He steps between the Witches and Lady Macbeth.)* This is obviously a lady of great virtue and breeding—a queen commanding of our respect!

LADY MACBETH: Finally, a young man of fortitude and conviction who knows how to take charge and stand up for the truth. Thank you, handsome young prince.

(Hamlet moves in for a kiss.)

HAMLET: *(To Lady Macbeth.)* You remind me of my mother.

ROMEO: Calm down, there's only room on this stage for one Romeo.

JULIET: Poor Ophelia, you just weren't his type. It seems that the Hamletster, here, has a thing for *older* women.

LADY MACBETH: Watch it! I was declared legally insane before I killed myself.

WITCH 1, 2, 3: *(Cackling with glee.)* Cat fight! Meow!

(Shakespeare sits up in bed.)

SHAKESPEARE: Enough! I will show you all a truly wicked tragedy if you don't be quiet and let me get some sleep.

WITCH 3: You heard him, dearies, the boss needs his beauty sleep.

(The characters all moan in protest but turn and begin to exit one by one SL. Ophelia remains behind. She approaches Shakespeare.)

OPHELIA: *(To Shakespeare.)* Remember, a comedy is merely a tragedy with a happy ending.

SHAKESPEARE: I'm sorry you didn't have a happy ending, Ophelia.

OPHELIA: *(Shrugs.)* Sometimes that's just the way the story goes, and mine was a tale of woe.

(Ophelia exits SL. Blackout.)

Scene 4

(AT RISE: Shakespeare's bedroom. Shakespeare is in bed sleeping. Puck is joyfully singing offstage SL. He enters singing and dancing. He runs and jumps on Shakespeare's bed and gets right in his face to wake him up.)

PUCK: Wake up, Lord Shakespeare. I have a few choice words for you.

(Shakespeare jolts upright.)

SHAKESPEARE: Puck, what could you possibly have to tell me that I don't already know?

PUCK: Oh, Willie, I heard it from a little bird that you are sick and suffering from writer's block, and I just wanted to point out that the little internal drama that you have going on in your head right now that is causing the aforementioned writer's block is merely "Much Ado About Nothing." Haven't we had enough tragedy for awhile?

SHAKESPEARE: Sure, Puck. But you know Mrs. Shakespeare, she's been at her foulest lately. I think that a tragedy would be cathartic right now.

PUCK: No worries. Relax. You know what to do with a miserable wife.

SHAKESPEARE: I write her into the script.

[End of Freeview]