



Dwayne Yancey

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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SHAKESPEARE'S LOST CHRISTMAS PLAY was first performed by Eskdale High School in Millard County, Utah, December 2020: Lois Farber; director.

EDITH: Kara Conrad
ANN: Yudnely Avelar
THOMAS: Ernesto Duran
BARTHOLOMEW: Adolfo Iverson
STEPHEN: Ernesto Avelar
EMMA: Burklie Wright
TOBY: Matthew Baker
OLIVIA: Jenna Conrad
ROGER: Diego Huerta
JACK: Aidan Faber
HORENSE: Danielle Hayward
ROYAL HERALD: Matthew Baker
PLAGUE DOCTOR: Carlos Saucedo

SHAKESPEARE'S LOST CHRISTMAS PLAY

HOLIDAY COMEDY. It's the 1600s and peasants in the tiny English village of Little Moldingham-on-Cheese are set on performing a Christmas play, even though they lost all their costumes, props, and scripts when they accidentally burned down the theatre during last year's Christmas show. With nothing to perform, the director contacts William Shakespeare to see if he will write them a Christmas play. In the meantime, the Plague Doctor and Royal Herald arrive and announce that a plague has descended upon the kingdom and that everyone must stand six feet apart and "all 'entertainments' are hereby canceled." Luckily, the stage manager finds a loophole: If the Christmas play isn't entertaining, then it can't be canceled because it isn't "entertainment"! Easy to stage.

Performance Time: Approximately 60-75 minutes.

CHARACTERS

(2 M, 1 F, 10 flexible)

HORTENSE/HORATIO: Director of the Christmas play; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

JACK/JOAN: Stage manager; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

ROYAL HERALD: Arrives in Little Moldingham-on-Cheese to deliver a wordy royal proclamation; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

PLAGUE DOCTOR: Arrives in Little Moldingham-on-Cheese with the Royal Herald; wears the costume of a medieval plague doctor [looks like a giant crow] and carries a long stick; flexible.

EDITH/ERASMUS: Accident-prone cast member who was cast as Third Three from the Left last year but wants to play a snowflake in the upcoming Christmas play; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

ANN/ANTHONY: Wants to play “the most perfect snowflake to ever fall upon all of Elizabethan England” in the Christmas play; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

THOMAS/THOMASINA: Wants to play a snowflake in the Christmas play; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

OLIVIA/OLIVER: Cast member prone to conspiracy theories and revolutionary ideology; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

STEPHEN/SUSAN: Extremely hungry cast member; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

BARTHOLOMEW: Dimwitted cast member who lives in a pigsty; wears exceptionally dirty peasant clothing; male.

EMMA: Vegan cast member; wears peasant clothing; female.

TOBY: Naïve cast member who thinks surgical masks are the latest fashion from London; wears peasant clothing; male.

ROGER/REBECCA: Cast member who has just returned from London; wears peasant clothing; flexible.

NOTE: For flexible roles, change the script accordingly.

SETTING

England, the tiny village of Little Moldingham-on-Cheese,
December, early 1600s.

SET

Stage area for Christmas play. There is a table. Stage curtains
hide the Christmas presents.

PROPS

Trunk
Plastic skull
2 "Snowflake" costumes that look like moth-eaten, mice-
infested stage curtains
Wooden bucket filled with blue glitter
Top hat
Cane
Toy mouse
Clipboard
Musical instruments (opt.), for Christmas songs
Letter
Thick book with the title "The Complete Works of William
Shakespeare So Far"
Long stick, for Plague Doctor
Surgical mask
Half-eaten apple
Autumn leaves
Holiday garb, for Edith
Winter garb, for Roger, Stephen, and Olivia
Flowers
Mistletoe
Cauldron
Table
Christmas tree
Box of Christmas tree lights and assorted ornaments
Ornament shaped like a moon
Ornament that is not gold
Christmas tree icicles
Stepladder, opt.
Star for Christmas tree
Curtain
Box of wrapped Christmas presents

SPECIAL EFFECTS

Moth fluttering, (opt.)

"Hello! Ma Baby" music, (opt.)

"We Wish You a Merry Christmas" music (or live music may be played by cast members)

"Deck the Halls" music (or live music may be played by cast members)

Christmas song for finale

"WELL. IT'S HARD
BEING A PEASANT ALL DAY
AND AN ACTOR ALL NIGHT."

—EDITH

SHAKESPEARE'S LOST CHRISTMAS PLAY

(AT RISE: England, the tiny village of Little Moldingham-on-Cheese, December, early 1600s. Stage area where the annual Christmas pageant will take place. Jack enters, dragging a trunk with much difficulty—grunting, groaning, wheezing, etc. Finally, Jack gets the trunk in place and sits on it to catch his breath.)

JACK: (Calls.) All right, everybody. Come and get your costumes! (Opens the trunk. A "moth" flutters out, opt. Waves his hand back and forth to indicate something stinks. To himself.) Don't blame me if they're half-eaten by moths! The stage manager last year didn't put them away properly. (Realizes.) Wait a minute. I was the stage manager last year. Never mind! The moths are there on purpose...to keep out the rats. (Reaches into the trunk and pulls out a plastic skull.) I sure hope this is from that production of "Hamlet" we did. Either that or I guess we finally know what happened to that actor who never showed up for rehearsal.

(Jack stuffs the skull back into the trunk and exits. Edith enters, spots the trunk, and approaches it.)

EDITH: Oh! (Roots through the trunk, pulls out a snowflake costume, puts it on, and admires herself. Ann enters and spots the trunk. Ann roots through the trunk, pulls out a different snowflake costume, puts it on, and admires herself.) I am the most perfect snowflake to fall upon the village of Little Moldingham-on-Cheese. (Shows off.)

ANN: Hmmph. I am the most perfect snowflake ever to fall upon all of Elizabethan England. (Shows off.)

EDITH: I am the most perfect snowflake ever to fall upon England since William the Conqueror did his conquering thing. (Shows off.)

ANN: Oh yeah, well, I am the most perfect snowflake to fall upon England since there ever was an England! *(Shows off.)*

EDITH: And I am the most perfect snowflake to fall upon England since there was such a thing as snow. So there! Ha! *(Shows off.)*

ANN: I am the most perfect snowflake ever to fall upon— *(Realizes.)* Wait! You can't wear that!

EDITH: And why not? Last year, I had to be a tree. A tree doesn't do anything. It just stands there like this through the whole show. *(Poses like a tree.)* At least if I'm a snowflake, I get to move around. Like this, see! *(Acts like a snowflake.)* I get to flutter down out of the sky... *(Flutters.)* ...and fall down upon the ground. *(Falls down on the ground.)* I might even get to do a dramatic death scene when I melt. Something like this... *(Acts out a snowflake death scene.)* "Oh, I'm melting! I'm melting!" *(From "The Tragedy of Hamlet," recites.)* "O, that this too too sallied flesh would melt/Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" Shakespeare wrote that, you know, in "Hamlet." The director said last year that if I kept acting the way I did, someday I'd get to play the part of Yorick. I don't know which one Yorick is, but it must be a pretty big part—not as big as Hamlet or the play would be called "Yorick"—but still big enough to have an actual name and not just Third Tree from the Left. *(On second thought.)* Or was it the right? I can't remember now. I always get mixed up by that whole stage left, stage right thing.

ANN: You fell asleep...

EDITH: Well, it's hard being a peasant all day and an actor all night.

ANN: ...onstage...

EDITH: Well, there's not really much space backstage.

ANN: ...during a show.

EDITH: Well, it's not as if I missed any lines.

ANN: If only you had missed something else.

EDITH: I don't think that was my fault, exactly. It's hard to see out of that tree costume. All those leaves were in my eyes, and I had to hold my limbs out like this...
(Demonstrates.) ...so when I turned around, I accidentally brushed up against one little thing.

ANN: It was a candlestick holder.

EDITH: I thought I recovered nicely. I don't think anybody really noticed.

ANN: You set your costume on fire.

EDITH: I just thought it was unusually warm for that time of year.

ANN: You flamed up like a Yule log.

EDITH: See...I stayed in character.

ANN: You could have just stayed put until we could douse you with a bucket of water.

(Edith reaches into the trunk and pulls out a bucket filled with blue glitter.)

EDITH: Oh, you mean this one? *(Takes the bucket and douses Ann with glitter.)* You know that's not real water, right?

ANN: You could have done the old "stop, drop, and roll."

EDITH: It's not my fault we live in an age without automatic sprinkler systems.

ANN: Instead, you just had to fling yourself right into the middle of the manger scene.

EDITH: They shouldn't have had flammable material around onstage. I'm pretty sure that's a fire code violation, not that we have fire codes in the 1600s.

ANN: Those flammable materials you speak of were sheep...live sheep.

EDITH: I never knew sheep could run that fast. Roast mutton coming right up!

ANN: You set the theatre on fire.

EDITH: Technically speaking, I think the sheep did. I think they're really the ones you should blame, not me.

ANN: All because of the Third Tree from the Left?!

EDITH: Well, it's not my fault it's the 1600s and we're still using candles to light the stage. Maybe someday there'll be a proper lighting system that doesn't involve open flame. Maybe someday people won't get so excited when someone yells "Fire!" in a crowded theatre. Maybe someday I'll get to play Yorick.

(Ann reaches into the trunk and pulls out the plastic skull.)

ANN: *(Indicating skull.)* This is Yorick!

EDITH: *(Disappointed.)* Oh.

ANN: And it wasn't exactly a crowded theatre, not after that opening night review. What was it the theatre critic said?

EDITH: You don't have to remind me.

ANN: No, no, I insist. I believe he said something to the effect of... *(As theatre critic.)* ..."The manger scene was particularly unrealistic, especially the costumes for the camels" –

EDITH: I wasn't the one who thought we could get by with pillowcases tied onto the back of a mule.

ANN: *(As theatre critic.)* "And the decision to use a live goat onstage was a bold but ultimately unsuccessful directorial decision" –

EDITH: That wasn't a goat. That was Bartholomew. He just likes to chew on things.

ANN: *(As theatre critic.)* "But the entire production was irreparably marred by Third Three from the Left, who spent the entire show performing what can only be described in polite company as a bizarre interpretive dance that brought to mind a chicken with its head cut off, except this particular "performance"—if one can call it that—would have been immeasurably improved if the actor's head actually had been separated from her body."

EDITH: I had head lice, okay? They itch.

ANN: So you ruined opening night. Then on the second night, you burned down the theatre. It's a good thing there wasn't a third night or you'd have either burned down the whole town or infected us all with parasites.

EDITH: Next time we have a theatre critic in the house on opening night, I'll burn down the theatre then. Maybe he'll get trampled in the melee! How is the Lord Mayor, by the way? Did he ever fully recover? He promised to have my portrait done.

ANN: He promised to have you hanged, drawn, and quartered!

EDITH: Oh, that kind of "drawn." So what does the "quartered" part mean?

ANN: How about you just stand over there and be Third Tree from the Left again? And this time, try not to burn down anything.

EDITH: But I don't want to be a tree again. I want to be a snowflake.

ANN: But I want to be a snowflake.

EDITH: What's so special about you that you get to be a snowflake?

ANN: Well, for starters, I didn't burn down the theatre last year.

EDITH: One little mistake, and they never let you forget about it.

ANN: Unlike your lines.

EDITH: I didn't forget my lines.

ANN: Oh, really?

EDITH: (*Remembers.*) Oh, right, the year before that. The big scene where I, well, you know...

ANN: We all know.

EDITH: I thought the improvised song-and-dance routine I came up with was a real showstopper.

ANN: Oh, it definitely stopped the show. Just like you could say last year's show was a real "barnburner."

(Edith reaches into the trunk, pulls out a top hat and cane, and breaks into the traditional song-and-dance routine of "Hello, Ma Baby.")

EDITH: *(To the tune of "Hello, Ma Baby," sings.)*

"Hello, ma baby! Hello, ma honey!
Hello, ma ragtime gal!
Send me a kiss by wire,
Baby, my heart's on fire!

If you refuse me,
Honey, you'll lose me,
Then you'll be left alone, oh baby
Telephone and tell me I've your own!"

(Ends routine with a big flourish.) Pretty cutting-edge, I thought, especially since ragtime hasn't even been invented yet...or the telephone, either. Granted, maybe not the most conventional choice for a Christmas pageant, but it definitely beats a medley of Gregorian chants, right? *(Ann glares.)* Right? *(Ann glares.)* Guess that's how I wound up Third Tree from the Left.

ANN: You're lucky you didn't wind up as firewood, although maybe we'd have been better off if you had.

EDITH: I'm not exactly making a good case for why I should be promoted to a snowflake this year, am I?

ANN: No, no, you're not.

EDITH: Why can't we both be snowflakes? We have two costumes...and they match!

ANN: Why not? Because no two snowflakes are the same.

EDITH: Oh. But these are. *(Indicating snowflake costume.)* See?

(Thomas enters.)

THOMAS: What are you two doing?

ANN: We're apparently comparing snowflake costumes.

THOMAS: Snowflakes?

EDITH: Yeah, you know, the white stuff that comes floating down from the sky...piles up into snowdrifts...occasionally turns into a blizzard—

THOMAS: I know what snowflakes are.

EDITH: Don't you think I'd make a good one. See? (*Shows off.*)

THOMAS: Quite possibly, except for one thing.

EDITH: What's that? Not the thing about burning down the theatre again?

THOMAS: (*Indicating costume.*) That's not a snowflake.

EDITH: Of course, it's a snowflake. See, it's got the little pointy things here... (*Points.*) ...and here... (*Points.*) ...and some down here... (*Points.*)

THOMAS: Those are stage curtains that the mice got into.

EDITH/ANN: Ew, ew, ew, ew!

THOMAS: That's not to say they can't be snowflake costumes.

(*Edith screams and takes off her "snowflake" costume.*)

EDITH: (*As she runs off, shouts.*) Soap! Soap! I need soap!

(*Edith exits. Ann and Thomas look at each other and smile.*)

THOMAS: (*To Ann.*) These are totally snowflake costumes.

(*Ann and Thomas laugh. Thomas puts Edith's snowflake costume on. Ann and Thomas exit. Bartholomew enters.*)

BARTHOLOMEW: (*Sniffs the air.*) I smell something. (*Inhales deeply.*) I smell cheese! (*Runs over to the trunk, stops, and inhales deeply before opening the trunk.*) Cheddar, maybe? Or provolone? Maybe some brie? I'd love some brie! (*Opens the trunk and is bitterly disappointed.*) No cheese. Just mice.

(Bartholomew pulls out a mouse and holds it up by the tail. He is clearly contemplating whether or not to eat the mouse. Hortense, the director, enters carrying a clipboard. Jack enters behind her.)

HORTENSE: *(Calls.)* All right, people, everybody gather around! *(Bartholomew flings the mouse back into the trunk, slams the lid shut, and sits on the trunk.)* Hurry up, chop chop! We don't have all day! Come on, come on, step to it! We're burning daylight! *(Realizes. To herself.)* All right, maybe not the best choice of words, considering what happened last year. *(Calls.)* Hello? Is anybody paying attention here? Your director's trying to talk to you! *(To Jack.)* How do they expect me to work under these conditions?

JACK: *(Shouts.)* Free food!

(Suddenly, Olivia, Edith, Ann, Thomas, Stephen, Emma, and Toby rush on. Ann and Thomas are still wearing snowflake costumes.)

BARTHOLOMEW: Where?! Where?!

EDITH: Did someone say, "free food"?!

STEPHEN: Out of my way! Out of my way!

EMMA: Are there vegan options? I hope there are vegan options.

STEPHEN: I've got a family of 14 starving children at home to feed. If I can't get enough to take home to them, I'll have to turn to highway robbery or other dishonest professions...like politics!

TOBY: What are you talking about? You don't have any children at home.

STEPHEN: This is your first show, isn't it? You're so cute. Out of my way! Out of my way! If I don't get something to eat, I can't be responsible for my actions!

OLIVIA: You know the only reason they feed us backstage is because it keeps us too busy to organize ourselves into a peasant's uprising that would bring down the entire medieval class system we're still laboring under. All this

food is just another trick by the ruling class to subjugate the peasant class to their will.

TOBY: Is that really true?

OLIVIA: Oh, yes. If you eat their food, you're simply collaborating with your own oppressors.

TOBY: Wow, I never thought about it that way.

OLIVIA: Good. If it makes you feel any better, I'll be happy to take all your food.

STEPHEN: *(To Jack.)* Hey, where's the free food?

JACK: Later. The Director wants to say something.

STEPHEN: Oh, man, tricked again!

OLIVIA: See, what did I tell you? It's all part of their plan.

STEPHEN: The old "bait and switch."

BARTHOLOMEW: I hear cheese makes pretty good bait, not that I know anything about mice. But I know all about cheese!

HORTENSE: Thank you. *(To cast.)* So I've called you together to talk about this year's Christmas pageant. As you know, we— *(Spots Ann and Thomas. Bewildered, just stares at them. To Ann and Thomas.)* What are you two wearing?

ANN: We're snowflakes! *(Shows off.)*

THOMAS: *(To Hortense.)* See? *(Shows off.)*

HORTENSE: You look like you're wearing a bunch of moth-eaten, mice-infested stage curtains.

(Ann and Thomas look at each other.)

ANN: *(To Thomas.)* But you said—

THOMAS: *(Shrugs.)* They looked like snowflakes to me. You know, "suspension of disbelief" and all that.

HORTENSE: The last time we tried to suspend something, the stagehand holding the Christmas star accidentally dropped the thing on the audience and knocked the entire front row unconscious. What was the name of the fool who did that?

EDITH: Actually, as I recall, they'd fallen asleep during act one, so I don't know that you can really say they were knocked unconscious.

HORTENSE: (*Realizes.*) You!

EDITH: Some of them were snoring so loudly the actors missed their cues.

HORTENSE: I thought I told you I never wanted to see you anywhere near this Christmas pageant ever again!

EDITH: That's why I'm over here in the corner. Or is this still too close?

HORTENSE: Anything on this side of the English Channel is too close as far as I'm concerned!

JACK: And yet you still cast her last year anyway.

HORTENSE: (*Shrugs.*) We were running short of trees. What can I say?

EDITH: Maybe if we'd made the star out of something lighter than those iron rods we used...although I must say it did make quite an impression when it fell...mostly on people's heads. You know, if all those people had just worn hats, I don't think you'd be able to tell at all.

HORTENSE: Edith, you have brought nothing to this pageant but trouble and chaos from the very beginning!

EDITH: That's not so! That one year I brought snacks for everyone before the show.

OLIVIA: (*To others.*) See? What did I tell you? Now they've even indoctrinated some of the peasants to carry out their evil schemes for them!

EDITH: (*To Hortense.*) I thought that would help lift people's spirits before the show. Nothing like a big piping-hot bowl of gruel to warm the belly and loosen up the vocal chords! (*Hortense glares. Remembers.*) Right. That was the year of the "food poisoning incident." But that's purely circumstantial evidence. I left that gruel sitting out for at least a week to be sure it was fresh.

HORTENSE: How is it you keep finding a way to worm your way into this show?

JACK: Not the word I would have chosen.

HORTENSE: *(To Edith.)* I'll deal with you later. *(To cast.)* So, do we have everybody? *(Note: For the following, as Hortense calls out their names, cast members raise their hands. Roll call.)* Ann! Thomas! Stephen! *(To Edith.)* Not you. *(Roll call continues.)* Emma! Toby! Olivia! Bartholomew! *(To cast.)* All right, good. So, I want to talk about this year's Christmas pageant in wake of... *(Glares at Edith.)* ...the problems we had last year.

BARTHOLOMEW: You mean the fire? Yeah, that was awesome. Whoosh! I thought it was all part of the show until everybody started stampeding out. And that was just the actors.

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* So the good news is that despite last year's "incident," the town has agreed to allow our troupe to perform a Christmas pageant in the town square.

EMMA: I can't believe they agreed to let us do that.

OLIVIA: Are you serious? People will come from miles to see us now. They're all hoping for a repeat.

TOBY: *(Realizes.)* So that's why the town passed an admissions tax.

OLIVIA: Cha-ching! Although that's more like the sound of a cash register, and there are no cash registers in rural England in the 1600s, so what do I know?

STEPHEN: I know we were promised food...

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* The bad news is that we lost almost all our costumes.

THOMAS: Except for the snowflakes! Or moth-eaten, mice-infested curtains. Whatever.

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* We also lost almost all our props.

EDITH: We still have a skull! We could do "Hamlet"! *(Everyone glares.)* Okay, I admit "Hamlet" isn't exactly your traditional Christmas fare, but we could just change a few lines and make it work. *(From "The Tragedy of Hamlet," recites.)* "To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—
 Such as a bad review from a theatre critic who wouldn't
 know his dramatic pause from an actor who just forgot his
 lines...or to take once again to the stage to perform our
 favorite show? (*From "The Tragedy of Hamlet," recites.*)

"To die, to sleep—
 No more"

Not like those people who were nodding off in the opening
 scene. (*From "The Tragedy of Hamlet," recites.*)

"To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub."

For we are but poor actors out in the provinces...

(*From "The Tragedy of Macbeth," recites.*)

"...a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more."

EMMA: An hour? I wish I had an hour onstage. Last year, I
 only had one line.

EDITH: (*From "The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet," recites.*)

"But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?"

BARTHOLOMEW: I think that light was probably the fire. I
 know some people backstage had to break a window to get
 out.

EDITH: (*From "The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet," recites.*)

"It is the east, and Juliet is the sun."

Or possibly the Christmas star.

HORTENSE: Wow. Just wow.

EDITH: You like that? It's my own interpretation.

HORTENSE: You just managed to conflate "Hamlet" and
 "Romeo and Juliet" into a single play.

EDITH: (*Proudly.*) It's a talent.

HORTENSE: You know what I call it?

EDITH: Riveting? Spell-binding? Must-see theatre?

HORTENSE: (*From "The Tragedy of Macbeth," recites.*)

"It is a tale

Told by an idiot, signifying nothing."

EDITH: Oh. That's not good, right? That doesn't sound good.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) Now, here's the worst news of all.

OLIVIA: You mean worse than burning down our theatre and most of our props and costumes?

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) We also lost all our scripts.

TOBY: Oh, well, that's not so bad, is it? I mean, we all remember our lines from last year, right? (*Others glare at him.*) Oh, right.

EDITH: I remember mine! (*Realizes.*) Oh, wait. I didn't have any.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) But, not to worry. I have a plan.

OLIVIA: (*Sarcastic.*) When the director says not to worry because she has a plan, you don't have to worry.

TOBY: Oh, good, because I was afraid there for a moment.

OLIVIA: That's when you should go into a full-scale freak-out. Like this... (*Demonstrates full-scale freak-out.*) We're doomed! We're all doomed!

HORTENSE: Are you quite finished?

OLIVIA: Sure. Carry on. Doesn't sound like it will matter, anyway. After all—

ALL: (*Except Hortense.*) We're all doomed!

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) On the contrary, we will be in even better shape than we were before.

OLIVIA: (*Sarcastic.*) And unicorns will fly through the skies.

EMMA: That's absurd. Unicorns don't fly. You're thinking of Pegasus.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) I have certain connections—shall we say, in London—and I have made arrangements with a certain well-known playwright to write a script just for us. Now, I'm not at liberty to say his name—

JACK: (*To cast.*) She's just being dramatic.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) But his initials are...William Shakespeare!

EDITH: You've hired William Shakespeare to write us a Christmas play?!

HORTENSE: Well, not exactly "hired." It's more of an understanding, if you will.

JACK: Or a misunderstanding.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) Sort of a gentlemen's agreement.

JACK: There was no agreement.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) Kind of a wink-wink, nudge-nudge situation.

JACK: There was no winking and no nudging.

HORTENSE: Fine! I wrote him a fan letter, and he hasn't said no. How else would you interpret that?

JACK: I'm just the stage manager. I only deal with the *real* world.

HORTENSE: (*To cast.*) I'm sure he's busy putting the finishing touches on it right now.

EDITH: Oh, oh, oh! I can see it now! "Richard the Third" reimagined as a Christmas play!

(*From "The Tragedy of Richard the Third," recites.*)

"Now is the *summer* of our discontent

Made glorious *winter*—"

Or "A Midsummer Night's Dream" becomes "A Midwinter Night's Dream"! The fairy, Puck, gets transformed into a hockey puck!

EMMA: It gets cold at night in winter. Better set it by day.

ANN: Oh, wait, I know! "Henry the Fifth"! (*From "The Life of Henry the Fifth," recites.*) "O for a Muse of fire..."

EDITH: Very funny.

OLIVIA: Actually, "Henry the Fifth" is one of Shakespeare's historical plays.

STEPHEN: I don't care as long as there's free food.

EDITH: That would be "Twelfth Night."

(*From "Twelfth Night," recites.*)

"If music be the food of love, play on."

Strike up the band!

(*Note: For the following, some cast members pick up instruments and play while other cast members sing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." Note: Cast members may mime playing instruments and recorded music may be used, if desired.*)

CAST MEMBERS: *(Sing.)*

"We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year!"

HORTENSE: Are you quite done?

EDITH: Encore maybe? *(Works the audience to cheer for an encore.)* Who wants an encore? *(To Hortense.)* See, they want an encore! *(To cast.)* Hit it!

(Cast members play and/or sing "Deck the Hall.")

CAST MEMBERS: *(Sing.)*

"Deck the hall with boughs of holly,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
'Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Don we now our gay apparel,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Troll the ancient Christmas carol,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
See the blazing Yule before us,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Strike the harp and join the chorus.
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!"

(Edith applauds. Cast members take their bows.)

HORTENSE: Very appropriate.

EDITH: Thank you. I thought so, too.

HORTENSE: Especially the part about "the blazing Yule."

EDITH: Oh.

BARTHOLOMEW: It was more like "see the blazing Yule
behind us" once we all got out. We did all get out, didn't we?

HORTENSE: *(Stares at Edith, under her breath.)* Sometimes I wish some of us hadn't.

(Roger enters, holding a letter.)

ROGER: *(Shouts.)* Hortense! Hortense!

HORTENSE: I'm right here. You don't need to shout, but you do project very well. So, yes, please go ahead and shout.

ROGER: *(Shouts.)* I've got a letter for you...from London!

HORTENSE: *(Excited.)* A letter for me?! From London?! I wonder who it could be from? Oh! Oh! That must be from you-know-who!

OLIVIA: The royal executioner maybe...with a warrant for a certain local arsonist named Edith?

HORTENSE: Oh, look! There's his name right there on the return address! I've done it! I've done it! I've got a letter from William Shakespeare! I know he's going to say yes! I just know it! How could he possibly tell us no?

JACK: Quite easily, I suspect.

HORTENSE: We're going to have a Christmas play by Shakespeare! A world premiere of a Christmas play by Shakespeare! Oh, I can feel it in my bones!

JACK: If that's what you're feeling in your bones, you may want to see a doctor.

HORTENSE: Oh, I'm too excited to read this! *(To Roger.)* Here, you read this.

ROGER: Me?

OLIVIA: Completely unrealistic. The literacy rate in Elizabethan England is five percent for women and 15 percent for men. You can't just hand a letter to some random peasant and expect him to be able to read it.

ROGER: *(Insulted.)* Hey, I'm not a "random peasant."

BARTHOLOMEW: You look pretty random to me.

ROGER: That's me, then..."Random Roger." Kind of has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

OLIVIA: It's how the aristocracy keeps us down. What's the point of publishing a revolutionary manifesto if nobody can read it?

HORTENSE: *(To Roger.)* Go on. What's it say? Read it to everybody! Oh! Oh! This is history in the making!

ROGER: All right. *(Clears throat.)* Ahem.

HORTENSE: Remember...use your diaphragm.

ROGER: *(Reads.)* "My dear Hortense—"

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* See?! "My dear"! I'm a "dear" to him!

ROGER: *(Reads.)* "I am in receipt of your recent communication where you inquired whether I would be receptive to writing a Christmas play for the poor players of Little Moldingham-on-Cheese."

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* That's us! Oh, that's us! We're definitely "poor players"!

JACK: I wonder what he means by "poor."

ROGER: *(Reads.)* "I refer you to the words of Hamlet, act III, scene 3, line 87."

HORTENSE: Oh, "Hamlet"! That's one of the big ones!

EDITH: Act III, scene 3, line 87? Act III, scene 3, line 87?

HORTENSE: "Hamlet" is one of my favorite plays! I wonder why he never wrote a sequel to "Hamlet"?

OLIVIA: Uh, maybe because everybody dies in the end?

EMMA: Way to spoil the ending there.

(Edith wanders around looking for a copy of Shakespeare's plays.)

EDITH: *(To herself, mumbling.)* Act III, scene 3, line 87? Act III, scene 3, line 87?

ROGER: *(Reads.)* "In closing, I am, your humble servant, W. Shakespeare."

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* Oh, "humble servant"! Did you hear that? He's our humble servant!

OLIVIA: Ever meet a servant who isn't humble? All the ones who aren't humble end up on the executioner's block.

ROGER: *(Reads.)* "P.S. Enclosed please find a glossy 8" x 10" that I have personally autographed, suitable for framing."

HORTENSE: Oh! A glossy 8" x 10"! I have no idea what that means, but it sounds impressive! *(To cast.)* Doesn't that sound impressive?

EDITH: Does anybody have a copy of Shakespeare's collected works lying around?

OLIVIA: We're peasants in the early 1600s. Of course, we have the collected works of Shakespeare just lying around.

BARTHOLOMEW: *(Realizes.)* Oh, you mean that big heavy doorstep thing? *(Edith nods.)* Sure.

(Bartholomew picks up a copy of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare So Far," which has been serving as a doorstep. Bartholomew hands it to Edith.)

EDITH: *(Paging through the book.)* Act III, scene 3, line 87. Act III, scene 3, line 87.

HORTENSE: What's it say? What's it say? Oh, I can't wait! Shakespeare is going to write us a Christmas play! What's it say?

EDITH: *(Reads.)* "No."

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* I wonder if it'll have a sword fight? *(Acting out a sword fight.)* I like the ones with sword fights! A sword fight may not sound very Christmassy, but I bet Shakespeare could make it work— *(Stops. Realizes. To Edith.)* What do you mean "no"?

EDITH: I mean, that's the line: "No."

HORTENSE: No what? There's got to be more to it than just that. Like "I know this will be a box office smash." Or "I know this will be the biggest thing since Henry the Sixth, parts one, two, and three. I don't see why he wrote that so many times. Those last few kind of dragged, if you asked me.

EDITH: I mean "no" as in "no."

HORTENSE: *(Disappointed.)* You mean "no" as in he's saying he won't do it?

EDITH: I'm saying that Hamlet thinks about killing his uncle and is debating back and forth whether he should, and then finally by line 87 he says, "No."

EMMA: Hamlet always did take a long time to make up his mind.

OLIVIA: So I wonder who Shakespeare is thinking about killing?

HORTENSE: Oh. Oh. Oh.

TOBY: So what are we going to do now?

STEPHEN: I don't really care what we do now. Is there any food?

OLIVIA: At least he didn't say the line from "Richard the Third," Act I, scene 2.

TOBY: What's that say?

EDITH: (*From "The Tragedy of Richard the Third," recites.*)
"Out of my sight, thou dost infect mine eyes!"

ROGER: Oh, there was one other thing...

HORTENSE: What's that? Maybe he referred us to Christopher Marlowe? I'd settle for a Christmas play by Christopher Marlowe.

JACK: Marlowe's dead.

HORTENSE: Oh, well, one of those other big-name London playwrights, then. Not that I can name any. (*To Roger.*) Was that what you meant by "one other thing"?

ROGER: There's a royal messenger on the way.

HORTENSE: A royal messenger? But what would a royal messenger want with us here in Little Moldingham-on-Cheese?

OLIVIA: Probably just a fancy word for a tax collector.

THOMAS: Tax collector? Uh-oh! Excuse me. I'll be right back, like, maybe in a couple of years? (*Starts to exit but doesn't get far.*) Uh-oh.

ANN: What do you mean "uh-oh"?

THOMAS: I mean, you'll see!

HORTENSE: We'll see what? (*Royal Herald enters, accompanied by the Plague Doctor. The Plague Doctor is wearing a traditional*

plague doctor costume that looks like a giant crow and is carrying a long stick.) Oh!

ROYAL HERALD: *(Announcing.)* Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye!
I am the royal herald.

BARTHOLOMEW: Is your name really "Harold" or did it just work out that way? Because if that is how it worked, then that would mean I'd be the Royal Bartholomew. *(Others glare at him. Plague Doctor pokes Bartholomew with his stick. To Plague Doctor.)* What? I just asked a question.

ROYAL HERALD: *(Announcing.)* Gather around to hear a royal proclamation! *(All closely gather around the Herald.)* Not that much around. Space yourself out some. *(The others move farther apart.)* A little more. *(The others move apart.)* A little more still. *(The others move farther apart.)* Come on, you can't really be that friendly, can you? Six feet apart...in all directions!

(Plague Doctor moves among the cast members and measures how far apart they are from one other. He pokes the cast members with his stick to move them farther apart.)

STEPHEN: *(To Plague Doctor.)* Hey! *(Indicating stick.)* Easy with that, mister!

JACK: *(To others, indicating Plague Doctor.)* I like this guy. *(To Plague Doctor.)* You want to stage manage our next show? I think you might have a real talent for prodding people. *(Plague Doctor pokes Jack.)* Ow!

ANN: *(To Plague Doctor.)* Nice costume. I think I like that better than being a snowflake. Mind if I—? *(Tries to touch the Plague Doctor's beak, but the Plague Doctor smacks her hand away with his stick.)* Ow! Guess you do.

ROYAL HERALD: All right, then. *(Clears throat.)* Ahem! *(Announcing.)* Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! A royal decree for the people of—! *(Plague Doctor stamps his stick on the ground.)* Oh, right. I mess that one up every time. *(To others.)* What's the name of this place?

HORTENSE: Uh, Little Moldingham-on-Cheese.

ROYAL HERALD: Right. Moldy Ham on Cheese.

HORTENSE: (*Correcting.*) Not "Moldy Ham on Cheese."
(*Enunciates.*) Moldingham-on-Cheese. You need to enunciate. (*Brandishing his stick, the Plague Doctor approaches Hortense threateningly.*) On the other hand, I don't suppose it really matters. You just go on and read your proclamation thing.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Clears throat.*) Ahem! (*Announcing.*) As I was saying...a royal decree for the people of Moldy Ham on Cheese. "Whereas the plague now runneth rampant through the kingdom—"

TOBY: (*Freaking out.*) A plague?! There's a plague?!

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "Plague," "pestilence," "pandemic."

TOBY: Nobody told me there was a plague!

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) Also commonly known as "contagion," "infection," "the sickness."

OLIVIA: (*To Toby.*) Why do you think we all have masks?

TOBY: Oh, these things? (*Pulls a surgical mask out of his pocket.*) I just thought they were the latest fashion from London. You know, like a codpiece for the face.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) The "grippe," the "bug," the "crud."

BARTHOLOMEW: I found a bug in my soup once. But he didn't seem to mind. He was just swimming round and round...happy as could be.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) The "outbreak," the "eruption," the "scourge."

TOBY: (*Annoyed.*) Okay, I get it!

OLIVIA: I think that's what we're all afraid of.

BARTHOLOMEW: I tried wearing a cod once. That was certainly an ordeal. Of course, it was an actual codfish.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) The "indisposition," the "infirmity," the "disorder."

STEPHEN: (*Annoyed.*) Can you hurry it up? I'm hungry. Somebody promised us free food.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) The "transmission," the "miasma."

EMMA: (*To others, indicating Royal Herald.*) I think he's slowing down. He only had two there.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) The "affliction," the "vexation," the "ordeal."

EMMA: (*To others.*) Guess not.

STEPHEN: This is definitely an ordeal to listen to all this.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) The "syndrome," the "condition," the "toxoid."

EMMA: (*To others, cheerfully.*) At least we get to learn some new words.

OLIVIA: I'm not sure I want to know some of these words.

BARTHOLOMEW: Maybe I shouldn't have asked a fishmonger for fashion advice. (*Plague Doctor pokes Bartholomew with his stick. To Plague Doctor.*) Hey, that thing's sharp!

EMMA: Unlike some people we know...

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "In summary —"

STEPHEN: (*Relieved.*) Oh, thank goodness.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "All forms of the baleful ailment, condition, or disease that is now running its course across the land —"

OLIVIA: All right, guess we've got that wrapped up.

JACK: Um, I think he's just getting started, actually.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "Including, but not limited to, all associated maladies, complaints, and fevers —"

EMMA: (*Raises her hand.*) I have a complaint. Oh, it's not a sickness or anything. It's just a complaint. My neighbor's roosters always wake me up in the morning when they crow. Could we pass an ordinance making it illegal for them to crow first thing in the morning? I need my beauty sleep. (*Plague Doctor pokes Emma with his stick.*) Or maybe I'll learn to live with it...

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "Therefore, it has been so decreed, ordered, ordained—"

OLIVIA: Here we go again.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "Declared, announced, proclaimed—"

TOBY: Do we need to write all this down? Is there going to be a test or something?

ROYALD HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "That all subjects are hereby commanded, directed, required, et cetera, et cetera, so forth and so on—"

STEPHEN: Whew! I don't think I could have taken much more of that!

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "To keep a distance of at least six feet from one other."

BARTHOLOMEW: I don't have any problem with people staying six feet from me.

OLIVIA: That's because you live in a barn.

BARTHOLOMEW: Well, technically, it's a pigsty.

ROYAL HERALD: (*Announcing.*) "Accordingly, all revels, plays, pageants, and other entertainments are hereby canceled until further notice. Signed—" Well, never mind. You know who signed it.

HORTENSE: Canceled?! Did you say "canceled"?!

ROYAL HERALD: "Canceled," "scrubbed," "scrapped." Shall I go on?

ALL: (*Except Royal Herald and Plague Doctor.*) No!

ROYAL HERALD: Good. My throat's getting a little scratchy. You have no idea how hard it is to say the same thing all day long over and over and over and— (*Stops.*) Maybe I'll just stop there.

HORTENSE: But you can't cancel our Christmas pageant!

JACK: Uh, I think he just did.

ROYAL HERALD: Hey, I'm just the messenger here.

ROGER: So was I, and they didn't like what I had to say, either.

JACK: Not that there was much left to cancel since we don't have any scripts or costumes.

ANN: Hey, snowflakes! *(Shows off.)*

THOMAS: Yeah, snowflakes. *(Shows off.)*

JACK: Like I said.

HORTENSE: *(To Royal Herald.)* But what are we going to do without our Christmas pageant?

ROYAL HERALD: Don't know. Not my problem.

HORTENSE: We've always had a Christmas pageant! People look forward to it all year long!

BARTHOLOMEW: Maybe not the Lord Mayor after he got trampled last year.

ROYAL HERALD: *(To Plague Doctor.)* So, whaddya say we call it a day? I'm gonna head down to the local pub and knock back a few.

(Plague Doctor mimes tipping a pint.)

HORTENSE: Uh, hot tea with lemon would be better for your throat.

ROYAL HERALD: I'm not talking about drinking. I'm talking about the locals. They think they're so tough...always want to impress the new guy from London. I'll show 'em. "Bam! Right in the kisser!" Come on, Doc, let's go.

(Royal Herald gestures to the Plague Doctor that it's time to go. They start to exit. Note: They are far away from the exit.)

HORTENSE: *(To cast.)* Sorry, folks, you heard him. May as well go back to your tedious, meaningless lives. You have nothing left to live for.

OLIVIA: Maybe if the Christmas pageant were that dramatic, more people would come to see it.

ROGER: *(To Hortense.)* So where do I file my expense report? I did run up some expenses on the trip to London and back, you know.

ANN: *(To Hortense.)* So does this mean I won't get to be a snowflake? Because I was really hoping to be a snowflake...

BARTHOLOMEW: *(To Hortense.)* Does this mean we won't be having the live animals onstage again? Because people totally loved it last year when those sheep caught fire...

THOMAS: *(To Hortense.)* Does this mean there won't be any Christmas this year? Because if we don't have a Christmas pageant, how do we even know it's Christmas?

STEPHEN: *(To Hortense.)* Does this mean there won't be any free food backstage? Because I'm all about the free food—

JACK: Wait!

STEPHEN: What? There's free food, after all?

JACK: Not you. *(Indicating Plague Doctor.)* Him...or her. Whoever that is under that getup. Hey, Plague Doctor, come here. *(Plague Doctor turns around and points to himself as if to say "Who, me?")* Yes, you.

ROYAL HERALD: Up to you, Doc. You can stay if you want. I'm going to go hit the hay...and anybody who gets in my way.

(Royal Herald shows off some boxing moves and exits. Note: At some point during the following, Royal Herald enters unseen and takes a seat in the audience.)

HORTENSE: *(To Jack.)* What are you doing?

JACK: You'll see.

HORTENSE: The pageant's lost...abolished...eliminated.

EMMA: *(To others.)* Now she's as bad as that herald.

HORTENSE: *(Melodramatic.)* Oh, woe is me! Woe is woe! My life's work down the drain!

TOBY: *(To others, indicating Hortense.)* What's she talking about? She works at the bear pit the rest of the year.

OLIVIA: If your job was dealing with angry bears every day, then our little Christmas pageant might look pretty good, after all.

TOBY: Well, guess you've got a point there. (*Plague Doctor pokes Toby with his stick.*) Not as sharp as his point, though.

HORTENSE: (*Melodramatic.*) Ruined! I'm ruined!

STEPHEN: Not as much as me. I was counting on something to eat here.

ROGER: If you had let me know, I could have brought you back something from London. Of course, I'd have probably eaten some of it on the way. Care for an apple? (*Offers Stephen a half-eaten apple.*) I found it lying in a street in London near the horse stables, so it's probably still good.

(*Stephen ponders the offer.*)

STEPHEN: Sure, why not? (*Takes the apple.*) Looks like all I'm going to get around here.

(*Stephen takes a bite of the apple. Jack approaches Plague Doctor.*)

JACK: So, Doc...may I call you "Doc"? (*Plague Doctor nods.*) Your herald said we have to stay six feet apart. (*Plague Doctor nods.*) But he also said that all entertainments are canceled. (*Plague Doctor nods.*) So, let's just suppose—for the sake of supposing—that we could hold a pageant with everyone six feet away?

BARTHOLOMEW: That doesn't sound very entertaining.

JACK: Exactly! (*To Plague Doctor.*) So if it's not *entertaining*, then it wouldn't classify as "entertainment," correct?

(*Plague Doctor nods.*)

BARTHOLOMEW: I have no idea where you're going with that. On the other hand, I have no idea about most things. But the flaming sheep last year...I have lots of ideas about them!

JACK: *(To cast.)* So if we were to hold a Christmas pageant with everyone six feet apart, it wouldn't count as a pageant at all!

BARTHOLOMEW: Uh, now I'm really confused.

JACK: Therefore, we could hold a Christmas pageant, after all. It just won't be a Christmas pageant.

BARTHOLOMEW: I'm definitely confused.

OLIVIA: I'm not.

JACK: See! Problem solved!

OLIVIA: *(To cast.)* I think Jack just found us a loophole. In another era, he might be a lawyer, or even worse...a lobbyist.

JACK: Thanks, Doc. You've been a big help. Maybe we can even find a part for you. You know, the strong, silent type. Or at least the silent type. You don't happen to have any hidden talents, I suppose? You know, like tap dance? Playing the spoons? Giving a pill to a cat without getting your eyeballs clawed out? Something like that? *(Plague Doctor shakes his head no.)* All right, guess not. Anyway, there you have it, people: The pageant's back on as long as we stay six feet apart! The Plague Doctor says so...or at least doesn't say so.

HORTENSE: You're forgetting one thing.

BARTHOLOMEW: Sometimes I forget my own name.

HORTENSE: *(To Jack.)* We don't have any scripts, remember?

ANN: Yeah, the fire.

BARTHOLOMEW: Whoosh! The sheep!

HORTENSE: And all our scripts. We don't have anything to perform.

BARTHOLOMEW: I could do some card tricks.

OLIVIA: Dude, you cheat at cards.

BARTHOLOMEW: That's the trick!

(Plague Doctor starts to exit. Jack stops him.)

JACK: Not so fast, Doc. We're not done with you yet.

HORTENSE: (*Sadly.*) If only Shakespeare hadn't let me down.
JACK: Maybe he hasn't.
HORTENSE: What do you mean?
ROGER: I'm not going to ask him a second time unless I get travel expenses up front.
JACK: Edith!
EDITH: Me? What did I do?
ANN: More like what *didn't* she do?
HORTENSE: (*To Edith.*) Why are you even still here? Didn't I tell you I didn't want to ever see you again?
THOMAS: I think that was pretty much everybody here.
EDITH: (*To Hortense.*) I've been trying to hide in the back.
JACK: No more hiding.
ANN: (*To Edith.*) Yeah, no more hiding.
THOMAS: (*To Edith.*) Yeah, if it wasn't for you, we could be snowflakes right now. Well, that and the plague.
JACK: (*To Edith.*) You know Shakespeare, right?
EDITH: Well, not personally.
EMMA: Apparently, our director doesn't, either.
JACK: (*To Edith.*) But you've got a copy of his plays, right?
EDITH: (*Indicating book.*) Right here, why?
JACK: Let me see that... (*Edith hands him the book. Reads title.*)
"The Complete Works of William Shakespeare So Far."
Very good. (*Rips out some pages and flings them in the air.*)
EDITH: Hey, what are you doing?!

JACK: There! All the works of Shakespeare...so far.
EDITH: (*Indicating book.*) You ruined it!
JACK: On the contrary. Just put them back in a different order and, presto, you have a brand new work of Shakespeare! Our Christmas play is probably in there somewhere.

(*Edith starts picking up the pages.*)

HORTENSE: That doesn't make any sense. Shakespeare hasn't written any Christmas plays.

JACK: Not presently, but maybe if Edith, here, puts the pages together in a different order...then Shakespeare *has* written a Christmas play for us after all but just didn't know it!

ANN: That's the craziest thing I've ever heard...other than us not running Edith out of town after what happened to last year's pageant.

BARTHOLOMEW: Those sheep sure ran out of town! Fire in the hole! Fire in the hole! Or was that when they fell into the cellar under the armory?

ANN: The armory full of gunpowder.

BARTHOLOMEW: Ka-boom!

THOMAS: Here we thought it was snow falling down and it was really just wool...

BARTHOLOMEW: Yeah, that was the best Christmas pageant ever...other than burning down the theatre and all that.

[END OF FREEVIEW]