

Mrs Shakespeare Draws A Line

by Vanessa Bates

CHARACTERS:

WILL SHAKESPEARE (a playwright)

JOHN WEBSTER (also a playwright)

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (another playwright)

APHRA BEHN (a playwright who also happens to be a woman)

MRS SHAKESPEARE (Will's mum)

(NB This can be performed live, ie in a household of 5, or via zoom.

Actors can be any age, cultural background or gender.

Use doubling if you need to, see if you can play more than one character.

If possible, have everyone in a ruff because that's funny.

Also, you need a teddy bear.)

Will Shakespeare is on his computer, zooming. Other characters online.

WILL

Prithee... John Webster, Christopher Marlowe, Aphra Behn... come hither from thy arras, also known as thy waiting room and we shall summarily discourse... via the internet.

APHRA

Art thou all gallery view? Ooh Yay verily.

JOHN

Hangeth on, I can't get the lighting right. I may have to set fire to a tapestry.

WILL

Ha ha Webster, I say thou art a boil. A plague sore!!

JOHN

Beg yours? Watch yourself Will Shakespeare, you'll be roast meat for worms when I'm done with you.

WILL

(nervously) Ha ha! Just japes, obvs.

CHRIS

Can we get started? According to my almanac I've got a Skype date with a shapely youth in half an hour.

APHRA

Typical, thinking with his cod-piece again.

CHRIS

(snidely) I'm sorry Aphra, I seem to have accidentally muted you. Were you saying anything important?

WILL

Ahem, Welcome ye lords and lady to zoometh, you may spy for yourself behind me... this pleasant Elizabethan abode, here be thy bookcase, here be thy fish tank and here...

JOHN

Is that your teddy bear Will?

APHRA

Have you got a teddy bear?

CHRIS

Will has a darling little teddy bear!

WILL

As I was about to say, Marlowe, thy canker-blossum, ... just *here* is my little sister Amelia's teddy bear – she wants to put it up at thy window sooneth for verily they have a Bear Hunt in our street for all the tiny tots.

Holds up the teddy bear.

APHRA

Oh! Thy ear-bussing, celestial dew-berry! What is thy darling bear's name?

WILL

Paddington. Not very imaginative, I'm afraid.

A woman bustles in behind Will. This is his mum.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Will! William Shakespeare! Can thou get off thy computer please?

WILL

Mum, do you mind!

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Will, are you playing Fortnite again? You need to get off. It's a bit late for screens, darling. Also I want to practise my yoga and there seem to be less rats in this room.

WILL

Mum! No, I am not playing Fortnite, I'm zooming my friends and actually working out some stuff for school. We've got another group assignment we're meant to be doing.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

You have friends? Ye gods. Do I know them?

WILL

You can see them in front of you...

There's Aphra Behn... writer of *The Rover*.

APHRA

Hi Mrs Shakespeare! Love what you've done with your makeup. Or is it food poisoning?

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Oh no no, *this*, it's just a bit of old lead smeared on the face and belladonna drops in the eyes. All the court's doing it.

WILL

You remember Christopher Marlowe. Wrote *Edward 2nd*, *The Jew of Malta*...

CHRIS

Is that your mum? "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?"

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Oh get away with you! Actually Chris I think we saw your play! Before lockdown!

CHRIS

Zounds, really, which play was that? *Dr Faustus*?

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Name escapes me. But it was very good, was there something about an elephant?

CHRIS

Not really, no...

WILL

Mother! Don't say that to a playwright. That is the height of rudeness!

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Keep your ruff on darling, you writer types are so terribly sensitive.

JOHN

It's true Mrs Shakespeare!

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Who on earth is that... oh goodness it's little Johnny Webster, how's your mother darling?

JOHN

Dead.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Oh dear. She's got my Tupperware from that last witch dunking we were at. Gosh doesn't that seem a long time ago everyone? Witch dunkings, public hangings, throwing rotten apples at criminals in the stocks. Feels like we've had iso for centuries.

WILL

Mum, for goodness sake, do you mind? I don't go storming around in my hose and doublet when you're having book club or cooking zooms, do I?

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Calm down Will, I'm just being friendly, Johnny doesn't mind me asking, do you love?

JOHN

Actually, I do Mrs Shakespeare, it's a bit of a sore spot. In fact, it was several sore spots, leading to giant boils and carbuncles. It was The Plague, you know. *Dance Macabre*, *Black Death* and so on...

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Really, The Plague? You better keep that Tupperware then. Has the doctor told you how you get it?

JOHN

He said either fleas transmitting virus from rats, or else cruise ships.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

What's a cruise ship?

WILL

Mum, will you stop interrupting! We've got work to do and you know I only get forty minutes on zoom because you won't pay for the professional version.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Well darling, you don't really need it do you? I mean I know you like to scribble bits and bobs here and there but you're not really a "professional" writer, are you?

WILL

Scribble?! Bits and bobs!! What do you call *A Midsummer Night's Dream* then?

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Um... have we seen that? Is it the one with the elephant?

WILL

No, of course not. What about *Measure for Measure*... surely you saw that?

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Maths is not really my thing darling.

WILL

What about *Twelfth Night* then, that was really successful. The King's Men packed out The Globe.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

I think actually I might have enjoyed the Eleventh one more.

WILL

Mum! There is NO ELEVENTH ONE.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Well perhaps you could consider it. *Toy Story 4* was released on Disney recently. People love a good sequel.

CHRIS

She might be right Will. Worth considering.

WILL

No, she is NOT right. We are not making Eleventh Night. That is *not* why we are zooming. We are collaborating on something new, special and different.

JOHN

Tenth Night?

WILL

No! I think that idea Aphra came up with at our last meeting was rather good.
“*Crown Prince Lear.*”

CHRIS

Crown Prince Lear? Hmm. Very understated. It’s not like a *Three Gentlemen of Verona* is it?

WILL

You mean *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. We had to cut the third one.

CHRIS

I was rather fond of *As You Like It*. You recall what Will wanted to call it at first... *WhatEvs*.

WILL

Yes ok ok, you were right, I was wrong. So, if I don’t call this new one *Crown Prince Lear*, what should it be? Aphra it was mainly your idea.

APHRA

Actually, it was Francis Bacon’s. And he’s not here tonight. So perhaps we should wait...?

CHRIS

Why should we wait for that dolt and dunderhead? I thought you complained he couldn’t keep his hands to himself. Even in a zoom?

APHRA

He is lewdly inclin’d, quite true. Nothing a kick in the arras wouldn’t fix. Or a punch in the dew-berries.

JOHN

As my dear mother would say... Highly Fed and Lowly Taught.

WILL

Ha! That’s quite good, Webster. Can I use it?

CHRIS

What about a bolting hutch of beastliness!

WILL

Oh Marlowe, I like it! Can I use it?

CHRIS

Yes yes, you lump of foul deformity.

WILL

Again! Thankyou! I've just the play for that. Where's my quill? I have to sharpen it... Just a sec.

Pause as Shakespeare exits.

Aphra looks at the others.

APHRA

Are you happy with this?

CHRIS

What, zoom? I think it's good. I love the backgrounds. Look.... now I'm at the beach! Now I'm in the Grand Canyon! Now I'm on a cruise ship!

JOHN

What's a cruise ship?

APHRA

No, I don't mean zoom, I mean are we happy that Will Shakespeare is taking all our best lines and play ideas? I spoke to Francis Bacon and he thinks in the future maybe no one will remember us, it will all be Shakespeare this and Shakespeare that, verily Francis was... a mountain of mad flesh about it all.

CHRIS

You have got to be joking! Remember Will Shakespeare and forget about us? That's about as stupid as saying The Plague is caused by...what was that thing?

JOHN

A cruise-ship.

Will re-enters.

WILL

I'm back everyone, I sharpened my quill. We've only got a few minutes so let's have ideas... no to *Crown Prince Lear*... how about *Duke Lear*?

APHRA

Why can't we have a Queen?

WILL

Queen Lear! Hmm, don't know.

APHRA

I think it sounds great!

JOHN

Ooh I know, what about *Ambassador Lear*?

WILL

Duke Lear!

CHRIS

What about *King Lear*? Pithy, regal, would look good on a poster. Aphra?

APHRA

I don't give a weasel's spleen.

JOHN

King Lear. I like it!

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Will, are you all finished now darling? Amelia wants to finish decorating in here. She needs her bear.

WILL

Yes Mum! Zoom's about to finish anyway. Alright everyone, we're agreed. Next play shall be... *King Lear*. Yay?

APHRA

Yay.

JOHN

Yay.

CHRIS

Yay.

ALL

Verily!

WILL

Marlowe, you host next zoom and can someone text Francis, we need his input pronto.

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Will!

WILL

Alright Mum! I'm going. Bye everyone! *(They wave and go)*

MRS SHAKESPEARE

Exit!

Will sees his mother holding Amelia's teddy and moving menacingly towards him.

WILL

Pursued by a bear!

END.