

# Shakespeare's Clowns

*By Lane Riosley  
and  
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## **STORY OF THE PLAY**

This play is a gathering of some of the most clever characters ever written! It provides examples of the clownish, comic characters written by William Shakespeare in many different kinds of productions through the ages. Far from circus clowns in face paint, these are clowns in the broadest sense, varying in sizes, shapes, ages and types. A few of the characters include the rude Mechanicals in "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; Constable Dogberry in "Much Ado About Nothing"; the boastful Sir Jon Falstaff in "The Merry Wives of Windsor," the boisterous sisters Bianca and Kate in "Taming of the Shrew"; and others.

Each selection from Shakespeare highlights a different face of his comedy, not only from the point of view of his writing, but from the standpoint of modern production practices, all showing Shakespeare's timeless versatility. The running conversations of the characters are commentary containing biographical and historical information.

The actors dress in black and use a drape and trunk for sets and costumes. The play is designed to run anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and can be rearranged quickly to fit any age audience from 3rd grade through 12th grade. Perfect for touring.

## **ORIGINAL PRODUCTION**

The play was originally produced for EarlyStages at Stages Repertory Theatre in Houston, Texas under the direction of Ed Meuth. The cast is as follows:

ACTOR ONE: Vincent Victoria  
ACTRESS ONE: Rebecca L. Byars  
ACTRESS TWO: Monique Viator  
ACTOR TWO: Randy Jobe  
Stage Manager: Sarah Smith  
Costumes: Patrick Collins

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**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(2 m, 2 w)*

**ACTOR ONE:**

*Bottom/Pyramus  
Orlando  
Verges  
Robin  
Puck\**

**ACTOR TWO:**

*Flute/Thisbe  
Polonius  
Dogberry  
Falstaff  
Baptista*

**ACTRESS ONE:**

*Quince  
Hamlet  
1st Watch  
Mistress Page  
Rosalind  
Kate  
Jaques\**

**ACTRESS TWO:**

*Snug  
Wall  
2nd Watch  
Mistress Quickly  
Mistress Ford  
Bianca*

*(\* Sections of the playscript can be rearranged for different age groups and to adapt to different running times. See end of script.)*

**SETTING**

A bare stage set with a single drape or arras hung between two upright poles. The arras is painted with a Renaissance scene of London. An easel holds a sign reading "Shakespeare's Clowns." The sign will change according to the scenes presented.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

This play is a gathering of some of the most clever characters ever written. It is also a history lesson in Shakespeare, in the continuing lives of his plays and how they have been presented over the last 300 years.

From the early 1600s to the present, Shakespeare's plays have gone through many transformations. Sometimes the changes made to the actual text of the plays rendered them unrecognizable.

Only in modern times have the words of Shakespeare been presented in the exact manner written: Our ancestors felt it was perfectly acceptable to rewrite Shakespeare, in all or in part, to suit their needs.

#### **THE GLOBE THEATRE, LONDON 1599-1644**

In London, on the south bank of the Thames and near the site of the Old London Bridge, the ancient theatres of Shakespeare have been excavated. The Globe Theatre is being slowly discovered by City Museum archaeologists. Before the discovery of the Globe and the nearby Rose, almost nothing was known about the theatres of the most famous writer of the English language.

There were actually two Globe Theatres: The First Globe burned to the ground on June 29, 1613, when the embers from a cannon fired onstage set the thatched roof ablaze. The play being performed at the time was *HENRY VIII* by Wm. Shakespeare.

The Globe was the birthplace of many of Shakespeare's plays. The Globe had a very small stage when compared with modern theaters and used very little in the way of sets.

#### **A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM**

This well-liked comedy was written around 1594-95. The story plot was apparently created by Shakespeare and uses elements of English folklore; characters from Ovid's *METAMORPHOSIS* (Pyramus and Thisbe); Plutarch's *LIVES* (Theseus and Hippolyta); and two sets of lovers from popular Italian comedies. The clowns in this play are the Rude Mechanicals, the good-hearted working men of London.

*MIDSUMMER* is a comedy of the amateur actor as Shakespeare saw him. These would-be actor/clowns are enthusiastic, meticulous, earnest and very funny.

#### **MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING**

Written about 1598, the story is taken from several sources including Aristo's *ORLANDO FURIOSO*. In the original production, the role of Dogberry was played by Will Kempe, the most famous clown actor of Shakespeare's time.

This play contains a group of local deputies, once again, the common working man. They are the Watch and they are supposed to keep the peace in the streets. Instead they bicker among themselves about who does what and how.

The Actor/Guides of SHAKESPEARE'S CLOWNS demonstrate the universal themes of the play when they restage one scene in a familiar classic television format.

#### **THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR**

This play was written about 1597 and behind its composition is a very interesting story: According to tradition, when Queen Elizabeth I saw Shakespeare's HENRY VI, Part 2, she was so delighted with the character of Falstaff that she told her cousin George Cary, Lord Hunsdon, that she would like to see a play in which the old rogue, Falstaff, is in love. Soon after, Lord Hunsdon was knighted by the Queen, and in gratitude, he commissioned Shakespeare to write THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR, Falstaff in love.

Sir John Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's most famous characters. He is a big, boastful, cowardly knight and a very great clown. Falstaff was written in the tradition of the braggart warriors of ancient Roman comedy such as MILES GLORIOSUS by Plautus.

#### **AS YOU LIKE IT**

This play is directly taken from the novel ROSALYNDE by Thomas Lodge. Shakespeare added some characters and changed the names of many others. The play was written about 1599-1600, one of many plays of the time to be set in the idyllic world of the English forest.

Within the play is the comedy of love, the very complex plot of masquerade and deception, switched identities and baffling courtship. The scene presented shows Shakespeare as a master of slapstick and pratfall comedy.

#### **THE TAMING OF THE SHREW**

The clowns in this play are many, for it is a comedy, but the scene offered is a boisterous argument between two sisters: The supposedly good, sweet and nice sister, Bianca, and the other, Kate the fury, the shrew.

Shakespeare was not afraid to write characters who were powerful women; why should he be? A powerful woman was the sovereign of England. Although no women were allowed to act on the English stage at that time, the women characters in SHREW are not afraid to make their feelings and thoughts known - the result is comedy.

## Shakespeare's Clowns

*(The ACTORS enter in black, carrying with them two trunks. An easel holds a sign reading "Shakespeare's Clowns." The following scene is the quintessence of amateur theatre, the same today or 300 years ago - all of the prospective actors are vying for a part, or several parts as the case may be. The style of the scene should come as close to classic Elizabethan clowning as possible, but short of archaic dialects. Very physical, spontaneous but carefully planned and very coarse. EASEL SIGN CHANGE - "The Rude Mechanicals.")*

QUINCE: Is all our company here?

BOTTOM: You are best to call them generally, man by man, according to the script.

QUINCE: Marry, our play, "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe." You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.

BOTTOM: *(Nods, agrees.)* What is Pyramus? A lover, or a tyrant?

QUINCE: A lover, that kills himself most gallant for love. *(BOTTOM considers the possibilities, good and ill of this turn of events.)* Flute, you must take Thisbe on you.

FLUTE: What is Thisbe? A wandering knight? *(Assumes a swashbuckling pose.)*

QUINCE: It is the lady that Pyramus must love.

FLUTE: *(Aghast.)* Nay, faith, let not me play a woman, I have a beard coming.

QUINCE: *(Plucks his chin for beard, is skeptical.)* That's all one. You shall play it in a mask, and you may speak as small as you will.

BOTTOM: *(Eager.)* I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe, too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice, *(As PYRAMUS whispering.)* "Thisne, Thisne." *(Then as THISBE.)* "Ah, Pyramus, my lover dear! Thy Thisbe dear and lady dear!" *(This is a very coarse actor.)*

## **End of Freeview**

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