

# What Fools These Mortals Be

*A meditation on love,  
taken from the works of Shakespeare*

**Adapted by Anthony Powell**

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## **STORY OF THE PLAY**

This show is a lively compilation on the many faces of love, taken from the works of William Shakespeare. Selections range from the ridiculous to the sublime: excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Love's Labor's Lost* alternate with some of the Bard's most beautiful sonnets in this very funny and moving show. Entertaining and accessible - perfect for touring groups! About 30 - 40 minutes.

## **ORIGINAL PRODUCTION**

Premiered at the Denver Center Theatre Company and toured to hundreds of Colorado schools.

The original cast of the Denver Center Theatre Company performances of "What Fools These Mortals Be" was directed by Anthony Powell. The members of the cast were as follows:

Tracey Copeland  
Lisa Barnes  
Mark Colson  
Andrew Philpot

## **CAST**

2 m, 2 w playing multiple roles

*(M1) Lysander, Petruchio, Berowne*

*(M2) Sonnet 116, Demetrius, Romeo*

*(W1) Hermia, Sonnet 29, Nurse, Kate*

*(W2) Helena, Juliet, Woodland Sprite, Sonnet 147*

## **SETTING**

A playing space with a muslin curtain hung at the back. The curtain is large enough to conceal four performers and has a big red heart and three images of Shakespeare's face painted on it. Brightly colored blocks of various shapes and sizes are strewn about.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the fall of 1991 I was asked to develop some sort of Shakespeare piece for The Denver Center Theatre Company's annual high school tour. Teachers in the area had been requesting a performance of Shakespeare for some time, and the prospect of working on the project struck me as a very exciting one. Here was an opportunity not only to introduce young audiences to the richness and beauty of Shakespeare's language, but also to illustrate in a very palpable way just how entertaining and accessible live performances of "the classics" can be.

But excitement quickly gave way to pure animal panic after I was informed that the show had to come in with a running time of forty-five minutes, tops, so that performances could be easily sandwiched in between class periods. Forty-five minutes? Which of Shakespeare's plays could possibly be whittled down to forty-five minutes and still convey a sense of the whole? Would a "Shakespeare's Greatest Hits" approach make any sense?

Might a piece based solely on his English history plays work? The more I considered the matter, the more I wanted to pack my bags and run far, far away. In desperation, I began to think back over my own high school years, trying to hit on a theme which would mean something to high school students and also guide me in the selection of material. What issues did I consider of life or death importance circa 1975?

Try as I might to keep my thoughts on an elevated spiritual plane, the primary images from high school which came to mind concerned one thing and one thing only: ROMANCE. I'm morally certain that one or two other aspects of life on planet earth must have impacted my existence between grades nine and twelve, but obviously none of it made much of an impression. I remembered seeing "The Godfather" and "Tommy" about 200 times apiece. I remembered a car wreck I was involved in. I remembered everyone in my graduating class using lines from Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Freebird" as their yearbook quotes.

But mostly I remembered countless romantic travails and the way Denise Spotts managed to ruin four years of my life. I mean, do any of us ever suffer the pangs of love to quite the degree that we did at age sixteen? And has anyone ever captured those same pangs on paper in quite the way Shakespeare managed to do? Suddenly, the fog cleared, angel trumpets blew, and my theme became apparent. I pulled out a volume of Shakespeare's collected works, brewed a huge pot of coffee, and got down to work. Thank you, Denise, wherever you are.

And so we come to *What Fools These Mortals Be*, the resulting tribute to Shakespeare and his most irritating muse, Dan Cupid. The selections include some of Shakespeare's most gorgeous poetry as well as some of his silliest prose. I've attempted to cover as many facets of romantic love as possible: thwarted love, love triumphant, twisted love, selfless love, and so on.

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I've played pretty fast and loose with the editing of scenes, added quite a number of goofy stage directions, and replaced the occasional word when its meaning has changed violently in the last five hundred years. I hope that the Shakespeare purists out there will forgive me. But my sincere hope is that *What Fools These Mortals Be* will serve to excite young audience members about Shakespeare and spur them to seek out full-length productions and enjoy his work in its original form. I envy them their discovery.

– Anthony Powell

## **What Fools These Mortals Be**

*(AT RISE: An upbeat rock and roll song dealing with romance plays loudly. Man #1 (M1) comes on, clearly in a foul mood about something. His love-life, no doubt. He is wearing street clothes, as all the cast members do, throughout. He spots the audience, decides to share some choice advice on the horrors of romance with them, and comes downstage to do so. He begins to speak, then realizes that he won't be heard above the music. He crosses UR to deal with the problem. Woman #1 (W1) enters from behind the curtain UR and they nearly collide. She didn't expect to see him, nor does she particularly relish the prospect. In fact, she tears off the letter jacket (his) that she's wearing, and throws it on the ground. Woman #2 (W2) ambles in from UR, sizes up the situation, and laughs in M1's face. At the same time, Man #2 (M2) comes onstage from behind the curtain UL. He's got a Coke in hand and is enjoying the music. Love seems just fine as far as he's concerned. The scene is played as though we were in the backyard of a house where a party (not a very good one) is in progress. By this time, M1 has stepped behind the curtain UR. We hear him shouting at the poor slob who's running the stereo indoors.)*

**M1:** TURN OFF THE MUSIC! *(SFX: The MUSIC ends abruptly. M1 strides downstage and addresses the audience.)* To say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays. *(HE sits disgustedly on the ground, downstage.)*

**W1:** Speak low if you speak love.

**W2:** Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs,  
Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes,  
Being vex'd, a sea nourished with lovers' tears.  
What is it else?

**W1:** A madness most discreet,  
A choking gall,

## **End of Freeview**

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