

SHAMLET

The Cast were basking in a standing ovation when a voice shouted: "Silence!"

Everyone in the West End Theatre fell silent.

"Sit down!"

Everyone sat down.

A man in a long black dressing gown decorated with silver stars and planets pushed his way through the Cast and took centre stage. Was he an actor?

No, he was something else...

"I have an important announcement. For the last 2 hours you have been watching a play you believe is based on the life of William Shakespeare. It is not! It is a complete pack of lies. That scoundrel Shakespeare did not write the work that goes by his name. He couldn't even write his own name! I know. I was there. *I* wrote it. My name is Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, at your service. And at the service of Truth and Justice."

His Lordship told the audience that he was born to write. And did. But in secret because it was beneath the dignity of a Peer. His tragic mistake was to hire a poor boot boy - Slick Willy - because he was illiterate and could serve as a human dressing-up doll to help flesh out the many characters seething in his brain. He filled several quartos with plays written for his private pleasure. But then things went wrong.

His Lordship was accused of corruption. Falsely - of course! But once locked in the Tower, he was at the mercy of his *loyal* servants who royally ripped him off. Some took silver, some took gold, some took castles, land, and cattle. But Slick Willy, fancying himself a Jacobean Joe Orton, took the most valuable of all: His Master's dramatic and poetic manuscripts. And by this base crime this Wicked Willy achieved more fame, fortune, and female attention, than Frank Sinatra!

Back in the Tower His Lordship was losing what little coin he had left betting against his jailers on cockroach races. Finally cleaned out by these cheating rogues, the desperate Peer struck a deal with John Dee, an itinerant Mage who scraped a living supplying cockroach accelerant to jailers. In return for 25% of his earnings Dee offered to buy Bacon's freedom so he could take revenge on Slick Willy. As a sign of goodwill Dee threw in a sample of his eternal youth elixir. Bacon, in the spirit of Science, tried it. And passed out.

"While I lay insensible they forged my name to a deed confirming my plays were indeed the work of Slick Willy. Dee and Willy touted my work around to everyone that mattered in show business. Some knew I wrote and might wonder how a Yokel Yob could produce such gems. But they sold the rights to everything! In cast-iron contracts! When at last I woke the whole country was talking about the Genius of Willy. And I'd been stitched up like a kipper!!

"So how am I here? And why am I telling you this? Because Idiot Dee prepared two potions. The real Elixir for him and deadly Poison for me. But he was so inebriated he drank the poison himself! Poetic justice, or what! You should have seen the look on Willy's face that night I tapped his shoulder in the Boar's Head. You'd think he'd seen a ghost. He slunk back to Stratford, but took the money with him.

"I am so weary. I have spent the last 400 years trying to prove my title and reclaim my work. But no one believes my story and Willy's supporters are a constant menace. So I went 'dark' as CIA say. Living under cover, changing my name, location, and identity. I made a living as the original Ghost Writer. My God, the stuff I had to turn out! I am so ashamed.

"So Slick Willy won. And he is still winning. Until tonight. I saw this play was on and thought: *My one chance to tell the World the truth.* I am exhausted but will now take questions."

Q1 *Can I be freed to go to the Loo now, please Lord Francis?*

Do you believe my story?

Yes. Undoubtedly.

Then of course you may, Madam.

Q2 *Who did you ghost write?*

The first rule of Ghost Writing is KEEP SHTUM! Don't ask who. But if you think it was good then it would have been me what wrote it.

All right. Dickens. All of Dickens. Lad couldn't read, let alone write. But he could learn it and recite it in Public, so he got away with it. James Joyce *could* write. But only if I inspired him by whacking his bare bum with a leather belt. A habit he picked up at his Grammar School. My arm was aching so much by the time we finished 'Ulysses' that I turned down 'Finnegans Wake'. Which is probably why it's such a mess.

My favourite, before you ask, was "Pride and Prejudice". I found this poor Young Woman crying on Waterloo Bridge at midnight, *She was middle class but she was honest, victim of a rich man's game, first he...* Well you know how the song goes. (I wrote that too.) But the story ends happily when I gave her the manuscript of P&P to sell and she never looked back.

Q3 *Have you ever done TV?*

It's too bloody hard to break into. I'm not the only one around in my situation. We call ourselves the Elixir Club. Unfortunately a lot of the 'Older Boys' have sewn up the Film and TV scene so you can't get a look-in. (I'm not naming names: Sophocles, Dante, Sappho. You know who they are.) It was Chaucer who came up with The Archers but even he can't break telly. Those snottosed BBC types...

Times *have* been hard. And I had compromise. All of Agatha Christie. That was me. A dozen Bunty Annuals. Ditto Beanos. Martin Amis. Mills and Boon. That boring Norwegian bloke. Oops... Any other questions? Yes, you, sir?

Q4 *Do you prefer a laptop or a desktop computer?*

Neither. I still use a quill pen. Always have, always will. Omigod! Did I really say that?

But don't get me wrong about tonight's piece. Maggie O'Farrell's OK by me. Just mistaken about Wicked Willy. She writes her own stuff and does it well. Not that you'll ever see a plug from me on the back of a paperback. Or will you? RATS! Done it again... I'll be off and so can you. Farewell, adieu, auf wiedersehen... Oh all right. One last question. You...

Q5 *Lord Sir Francis, in all your years what is the most important lesson you've learned?*

Good question. Well, it has to be this: *Save our Planet*. Oh and you remind me that I'm 462 today. So why aren't you singing?

So everyone sang 'Happy Birthday' and no one noticed him slip away.

As I waited for the Audience to troop out I suddenly noticed that the empty seat beside mine was now occupied. Somehow...

There sat a woman in a silver dress decorated with black stars and planets. She pushed her long fair over her ear and leaned towards me.

"Well, how did I do?" she whispered. "What? Don't you recognise me?"

Then I did...

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