

Gentlemen and Players

a play in one act

by Vic Mills

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Gentlemen and Players by Vic Mills

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For Lisa

'Not even the rain has such small hands'
ee. Cummings

First presented by Blackwood Little Theatre at the Congress Theatre,
Cwmbran, May 8th 2010

Ben Johnson	:	Dave Livingstone
William Shakespeare	:	Vic Mills
John Shakespeare	:	Peter Musto

Directed by Neil Maidman

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Characters:

- Ben Johnson: Elizabethan and Jacobean poet and playwright. Close friend of William Shakespeare. He is a powerfully built, masculine figure – confident and brash – a cockney. His rough manner belies his intelligence.
- William Shakespeare: Elizabethan and Jacobean poet, playwright, actor and landowner – originally of Stratford-Upon-Avon, Warwickshire. A man of relatively humble beginnings. Shakespeare is rather theatrical in manner and speaks in an RP accent until his father appears – then he reverts to a broad, Warwickshire accent.
- John Shakespeare: Father of William. A man who rises in society from working as an apprentice tanner to becoming a glover, a householder, a magistrate and alderman of Stratford Upon Avon – and eventually into being granted a coat of arms and becoming a gentleman. He speaks in a bluff manner with a strong, Warwickshire accent.

The setting is simple and stark, with platforms running at various heights to create several playing levels. There is an open trapdoor centre. This may be within a platform or on the floor of the stage. Just right of stage centre is a set of stocks – the type in which the victim stands with head and arms enclosed whilst legs are free.

Immediately behind these stocks is a raised area – between three and five feet above the stage.

Above the playing area hangs a huge disc – a full moon.

The disc of moon is lit bright. Lights then fill, falling on a figure in the stocks. His head and arms are visible where they protrude through the openings in the stocks. Standing above him, on the raised platform, is another figure. This figure bends down and rubs something on the imprisoned figure's lips and pushes his fingers into his mouth.

The figure in the stocks is the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwright, Ben Jonson. The figure standing over him is Will Shakespeare. They are both in dress of the period. Shakespeare is dressed quite elaborately, whilst Jonson is in simple clothes, appropriate to being in the stocks.

- Ben: Hmm. Nice. Nice. I think. Maybe. Hmm, is that nice? Hmm. That starts to burn. Maybe that isn't nice. Maybe that is... God! What is that? That is burning like hell fire! I know the flavour – and that was nice, but the burning, the burning is...
- Will: Good. Good. You are experiencing the burning. Your lips, your whole mouth is on fire. What does it feel like, Ben? Find words for the pain.
- Ben: Aaargh! Aaargh! Aaaaaargh! It's... it's...
- Will: Come on, Ben. Basic test for any poet. Metaphor, simile for burning. Have a little more, would that help?
- Ben: No that would not...aaaargh!
- Will: I can't help you, Ben. My words would not be a first hand description of your agony. Give me something!
- Ben: Aargh! Wipe the stuff off my bloody lips for bollocks' sake, you...
- Will: Now, now, you what? Careful, what am I?

- Ben: You...I can't think when I am being tortured. Give me some water!
- Will: Did I hear a please?
- Ben: Are you taking the piss? Please! Alright? Please! Please give me some water!
- Will: Why?
- Ben: Why?
- Will: Yes – a train of logic, if you please. Why?
- Ben: My lips are burning. You are my friend. You are at hand. You have water. You would not want me to be in pain. I am in pain. You have the means and motive to relieve that pain. Therefore...
- Will: Not bad, Ben. But, Ben...
- Ben: What, Will?
- Will: But, Ben, you forget, sweet, Ben, twas I that put the pain there and I must have had a motive for that, mustn't I? Get to that, my bully boy, and rescue might be close at hand.
- Ben: I thought you had come here to rescue me.
- Will: I thought so, too. Isn't it strange how things change, Ben? How a character's motives are more complicated than, 'I go here to do this' – well, in *my* plays they are... perhaps not in *all*...not that I mean to imply...
- Ben: And still my mouth burns...water. Have you got some water in that bag of yours?
- Will: (Searching) No. But I could make some water. How would that be?
- Ben: What?
- Will: You know how water is made, surely, Ben?
- Ben: Making water, Will?
- Will: Even the newborn child can make water, Ben.
- Ben: No, no, no, you wouldn't. For Christ's sake, Will!

- Will: (Fumbling with what Ben thinks is his clothing; he takes a bottle from his bag and begins to empty liquid in a trickle over Ben's head). Ah. That's better.
- Ben: What is that? What? (He tastes what is dripping down his face). That's...that's disgusting! Is that...you've just pissed on my head!
- Will: (Laughing) I had you there my friend. You fell for that. You thought I would piss on your head? I can't believe you would think that of me.
- Ben: What is that? It really does taste like piss.
- Will: And you would know this because?
- Ben: Come on, Will. If it isn't piss, what is it?
- Will: Oh, it is piss, alright. It just isn't fresh piss.
- Ben: Not fresh piss?
- Will: No, I filled a bottle earlier.
- Ben: What? Why? In the name of buggery, why?
- Will: Oh. Well, I wasn't sure that at just the right moment, I would be able to go. I wanted to, but, given it was someone's head, even yours, I wasn't sure that my nerves might not stop the whole thing at the vital moment. You see?
- Ben: Oh, yes. I see why fresh urine might have been the problem, Will. And, of course, that was what was worrying me – fresh or pre-prepared. It still leaves me with a minor issue...
- Will: What's that?
- Ben: Why is my friend, who has come to provide me with comfort and succour in the dead of the night, whilst I am languishing in the stocks through no fault of my own, first smeared my lips with some kind of pepper sauce strong enough to take the skin off, and then anointed my head with a very large volume of... *pre-prepared piss?*
- Will: You do indignation very well. As a writer you can be brilliant, if a little knob, gob and guts – as we say in the trade. But the indignation, particularly of the small man, *that...* oozes out of you with very little squeezing.

About the playwright

Vic Mills wrote his first play as an undergraduate and has written plays and musicals for schools as well as writing one act and full length plays for adults. Recent work has included several award winning one act plays and a full length play about football fans: *Waiting For Robbo*, which met with critical and popular acclaim and *Frost At The Westgate* which explores the Chartist movement in Wales and the events of the Gwent Uprising. Vic has been working most recently on plays whose central characters are in their late teens and which explore the complex issues around youth disenfranchisement and poverty in the areas of South Wales where he works. Vic loves his wife Lisa, his daughter and grandson, Cardiff City, Bob Dylan, the sea and a well-made faggot sandwich. He works as Deputy Headteacher at a Bridgend school.

Gentlemen and Players

Just when the Shakespeares were finally getting a coat of arms and becoming 'gentry' at last; William was performing in a play for Ben Jonson, in which a country family gain a coat of arms with the comic motto, 'Not Without Mustard'. This appears to be a jibe at the Shakespeare's motto of, 'Not without Justice'. In this hilarious comedy, Will takes his revenge on his best friend, Jonson. The play features an angry and troubled Will, a bemused and tormented Jonson and, with echoes of Hamlet, the touching appearance of the ghost of Will's father, John Shakespeare. This is robust, bawdy comedy, but there are levels of complex enjoyment – with many references to the works and life of the playwright for members of an audience who know and love Shakespeare – and a strong plot and comedy for those for whom all this is less familiar.

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