



# *Shakespeare's Canon*

**by Douglas Roberts**

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## Notes

William Shakespeare has created Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; his best two characters ever, but is struggling to find a suitable script to place them in. He tries them in play after play but as the writing process takes over, his characters are unexpectedly killed or sidelined early on, and he abandons each script in favour of another.

Originally written in 1997, the play has had several revisions and has been performed by youth theatre companies in Scotland, England and New Zealand. It has a run time of approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

Shakespeare's Canon is suited to an ensemble cast of around 14 members, with most players performing multiple roles.

Shakespeare's Canon was written by Douglas Roberts, a writer, director and theatre educator based in Scotland and New Zealand.

## Cast list

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4	Scene 5	Scene 6	Scene 7	Scene 8	Scene 9
William Shakespeare	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Rozencrantz	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Guildestern	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Titania	●	●							
Oberon	●								
Oak		●		●	●				
Elm		●		●	●				
Ash		●		●	●				
Sycamore		●		●	●				
Puck		●							
Hamlet			●	●		●	●		●
Witch Grindstone			●						
Witch Hecate			●						
Witch Bayman			●						
Macbeth			●						
Lady Macbeth			●						
Messenger			●						●
Macduff			●						
Benvolio				●					
Romeo				●					
Juliet				●					
Trinculo					●	●			
Captain				●	●				
Prospero					●				
Caliban					●				
Miranda					●	●			
King									●
<b>NON-SPEAKING ROLES:</b>									
<i>Fairies</i>	●	●							
<i>Murderers</i>			●						
<i>Doctor</i>			●						
<i>Nurse</i>			●						
<i>Petruchio</i>				●					
<i>Pallbearers</i>				●					
<i>Sailors</i>					●				
<i>Laertes</i>									●
<i>Queen</i>									●
<i>Horatio</i>									●

## Scene One

Darkness. Opening music plays and fades to echo

Lights up to a black bare stage set. Three stools are arranged in a line across the stage. A stepladder stands at the two-thirds line, from which hangs some cloth as if partially torn down from a previous installation. On an extended peripheral section of stage sits William Shakespeare at a desk with quill and parchment, various desk items including a skull with a candle on it and a wine goblet. The candle burns. William writes.

After a time he gazes thoughtfully around, gets up and starts to wander about the stage, pausing and pointing as if positioning characters in a scene. He rehearses various arrangements of characters in this way but dismisses each idea with a frustrated shake of the head. He pauses, as if about to speak to the audience, but changes his mind and returns to his desk, staring into the middle distance in a thoughtful way.

Shak      Rosen-stern. Rosen....stern. No. Doesn't sound right.

He continues writing.

Lights fade to moonlight

Enter Titania with three fairies in attendance. She is guided to one of the stool seats and sits down. The fairies fuss around her. Shakespeare stops writing and thinks, and the action on the stage stops. He returns to his writing and Oberon enters with Puck. Titania and the fairies stand and face him.

Oberon    Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!

Titania    What, jealous Oberon? Fairies, skip hence; I have forsworn his bed and his company.

Titania turns to leave.

Oberon    Wait! Am I not thy Lord?

Titania    (*turning back*) Then I must be thy lady. But you have not kept faith with me Oberon, consorting instead with Rosenstern and his troupe of ne'er-do-well spirits.

Oberon    Who is this Rosenstern?

Shakespeare looks up. The players all fall still.

Shak      No, that doesn't work. Let's see... Rosen-stern... Rosen-baum... Rosen-crantz... That's it! Rosencrantz. Rosencrantz and Goldenballs. No. Too obvious. Golden-hind. Guilden-hind. Guildenstern. Ah. Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's it.

Exit Players. Enter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Ros and Guil). Each carries a bag of coins. Guil sits on the centre stool, takes out a coin and flips it. When it lands Ros examines it, announces 'heads' and puts the coin in his own bag.

Ros        Heads.

**Flips a coin**

              Heads

**Flips a coin**

              Heads

**Flips a coin**

              Heads

Guil        Is this it?

Ros        Is this what?

Guil        The sum total of our existence.

Ros        It is at the moment

Guil        A game of chance?

**He flips a coin.**

Ros        It seems appropriate. Heads.

Guil        And that's another thing.

Ros        What?

Guil        It's always heads.

Ros        It's my lucky day.

**They go on flipping coins. Shakespeare stands up and wanders over to them, thinking aloud.**

Shak        It's my lucky day... Then one of them is enchanted by the mischievous spirit Puck and grows a donkey's head. He, in turn, is found by Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, in the forest and she falls in love with him because of some magical juice which has been put on her eyes while she was asleep. Oh, William Shakespeare, you're getting good at this. Now, I need some trees.

**He returns to his desk and goes on writing.**

## *Scene Two*

**Lights shift to a dim green. Ros and Guil continue to flip coins in a bored way. Oak, Elm, Ash and Sycamore sidle on to the stage and hold up their branches.**

Oak        I don't believe this. I'm a tree again.

Ash        It could be worse.

Oak        Don't get me started.

**Ros and Guil notice the trees, look quizzically at each other and return to the coins. Enter Puck, through the trees.**

Puck        What hempen homespuns have we here, so near the sleeping Fairy Queen?

**Guil flips a coin on to the floor and Ros walks over to get it. Puck creeps up behind Guil, puts the donkey's head on him, then hides behind a tree. Ros picks up the coin and turns round to Guil.**

Ros        Heads. Aaahhh!

Guil        What?

Ros        Aaahhh! Your head!

**He runs offstage, screaming.**

Guil        What? What? Come back! Don't be an ass! Oh come on. I thought things were getting better. I'm not coming to look for you. Where are you? Come back!

**Titania enters sleepily, yawning and stretching.**

Titania    What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?

Guil        Come back. I'm not coming after you this time. And bring my money back!

Titania    I pray thee, gentle mortal, call again. You have so sweet a voice!

Guil        Who's there? Who is it?

Titania    It is I, your fairy love! Fairies! Come hither and attend to this beautiful creature!

**Enter fairies, who fuss around Guil, stroking his hair and arms. Titania sits at his feet and leans on his knees.**

- Guil        What's going on?
- Titania     You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen on all my travels
- Guil        Really?
- Titania     Let us sooth you and caress you all over!
- Guil        This sort of thing doesn't happen to me. I don't believe it! *His* lucky day indeed!
- Titania     Tell us your deepest desires, my love, and your every wish will be granted.
- Guil        My every..? Where do I start? Is this really happening?
- Titania     Rest in my arms and think no more about the cares of the world.
- Guil        I *have* been a bit tired recently.

**He slides off the stool and starts to get comfortable on the floor. Enter Ros. He pulls a branch from Elm and approaches the group on the stage.**

- Elm        Hey!
- Ros        Leave my friend alone!
- Guil        Oh no!
- Titania     Who comes this way?
- Guil        It's nothing, just ignore him. *Go away!*
- Ros        *(brandishing the branch)* What are these creatures, so withered and so wild in their attire? Get away from him you foul demons!

**The fairies all pull away from Guil in alarm, chattering amongst themselves.**

- Guil        No wait! Don't go! It's a mistake, he's looking for someone else. *Go away!*
- Ros        Don't worry, I'll get you out of this! They've put some kind of a spell on you.
- Guil        No they haven't. I'm perfectly fine. *Go away!*
- Ttania     Is this some friend of yours?
- Guil        I've never seen him before in my life. *Get lost!*

Ros I should never have run off. What kind of a friend am I to leave you at such a time?

Guil I forgive you, OK? Now can we talk about this later?

Ros But I'm here now and I'm not leaving you again.

Guil I really *don't* need your help right now.

Ros Don't say another word my friend; leave this to me. Get away you demons from the foulest depths of hell! Scatter to the four winds and never return!

**He waves the branch. The fairies squeal and scatter off the stage, dragging Titania with them. She reaches back longingly as Guil watches her go. Ros chases them off the stage and there are noises off. Puck steals out from behind the tree, takes the donkey head off and exits.**

Titania My love!

Guil I'll wait for you! I'm here 'til Thursday!

**Enter Ros. He is fired up by his powerful performance.**

Ros They've gone.

Guil I'll get you for this

Ros They won't be coming back in a hurry.

Guil For the first time in my life...

Ros No sir; I showed them who's boss here.

Guil Things made sense for a moment.

Ros Anyway. Now things are back how they were. Just you and me.

Guil Yes. Just you and me.

Ros And some trees. Er..

Guil Yes.

**A long silence. They both sit looking around uncomfortably, thinking their own thoughts. Eventually Ros takes out his large coin bag and starts sifting through the coins. He flips one into the audience. They both watch it, unsure what to do next.**

Ros So, that's it then.

**Shakespeare suddenly stands up, picks up the sheaf of papers he's been writing on, crumples them up and throws them into the audience.**

Shak      Rubbish. This doesn't work at all.

**He wanders across the stage looking at Ros and Guil, then notices the trees.**

Well, go on.

Syc      What's wrong? Too leafy?

Shak      It's not you, it's the plot.

Syc      You've lost it?

Shak      It's not the right one. These are the best characters I've ever come up with, but I just can't find the right story for them.

Oak      That's a shame. I thought it was going quite well.

**The trees slope off the stage muttering to each other; 'took half an hour to get this makeup on for five minutes on stage' 'I'm going for a drink' 'There's auditions for Waiting for Godot next week' etc.**

## *Scene Three*

**Lights brighten.**

**Shakespeare sits down on a stool. Guil is sitting on the floor. Ros sits on the centre stool.**

Ros        It was a good story.

Shak       It just went round in circles.

Guil       Even a few more minutes..

Ros       But it just wasn't us. You needed someone more rustic. Someone who's at the bottom of the heap.

Guil       I've been there. I could do that.

Shak       It needs a new angle. A different setting. Darker. Perhaps you're more suited to a darker setting.

Ros       Darker?

Shak       Treason, murder, that kind of thing.

Ros       Treason and murder? That sounds like us, don't you think?

Guil       Murder. Yes. I was thinking that.

**Shakespeare gets up, leaving Ros and Guil reflecting on what might have been. He goes back to the desk and writes.**

**Enter Hamlet, with a skull. He wanders moodily around the stage, notices Ros and Guil but doesn't speak to them. He goes to the front and looks at the skull.**

Hamlet    Alas, poor Hamlet!

**Exit via the audience. Ros and Guil look at each other and shrug. Shakespeare suddenly becomes inspired and looks across at them.**

Shak       Let's try this one. A blasted heath in Scotland. The wind blows against a gnarled old tree.

**He starts writing furiously. Ros and Guil rearrange the stools in a group centre stage, then exit.**

**Lights darken to moonlight. Sound of wind blowing. Elm is pushed reluctantly on to the stage, and takes up a position behind the stools. Enter three witches (Grindstone, Hecate and Bayman), who circle the stools menacingly. Thunder and lightning.**

Grind       When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning or in rain?

Hecate     When the hurly-burley's done, when the battle's lost and won.

Bayman Where the place?

Grind Upon the heath!

Bayman There to meet with..?

All Macbeth!!

**Thunder and lightning. A drum begins to beat offstage.**

Grind A drum! A drum! Macbeth does come!

All Hush!

**They crouch around the stools. Enter Macbeth and Ros. Ros beats a drum. They see the witches and start back in fear.**

Ros What are these so withered and so wild in their attire?

Macbeth Speak if you can, what are you?

**The witches stand up slowly one at a time and point at Macbeth.**

Grind All Hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

Hecate All Hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

Bayman All hail Macbeth, that shall be King hereafter!

Ros *(stepping forward)* Look, what's going on here? Leave my friend alone.

Macbeth Just a minute, Rosencrantz. *(to the witches)* Did you say 'King'?

Ros She did. She said 'King'.

Macbeth King!

Ros Why so afraid of good news, Macbeth? She said you're going to be the King! *(to the witches)* Not that I take this sort of thing too seriously. But if I did, what about me? What's going to happen to me?

**The witches approach Ros one at a time.**

Grind Hail, Rosencrantz; lesser than Macbeth, and greater!

Hecate Hail Rosencrantz; not so happy, yet much happier!

Bayman Hail Rosencrantz, who shall beget kings, though thou be none!

Ros Right. Sorry I asked.

Witches Macbeth and Rosencrantz, all hail!

**They exit with a clap of thunder.**

Macbeth Wait! Tell us more!

Ros Let them go Macbeth. They lost their edge after the first bit anyway.

Macbeth A strange encounter. We must not speak of this to the others, Rosencrantz.

Ros Yes my Lord.

Macbeth Come Rosencrantz, let us press on to King Guildenstern's camp.

**Exit all, including the tree. Enter Guil dressed as a King. Enter Lady Macbeth from the other side of the stage. She greets him warmly.**

Lady M A warm welcome to our beloved King!

Guil Royal blessings on you, my Lady Macbeth.

Lady M Come, my Lord and I shall bring you to your faithful Thane of Cawdor.

**Exit. Lights shift to red.**

**Enter Macbeth, stealthily. He carries two bloodstained daggers, and his clothes are smeared with blood. Enter Lady Macbeth. She is also fearful, but she rushes to him.**

Lady M My husband!

Macbeth I have done the deed. Guildenstern is dead.

Lady M Why did you bring the daggers from the place? They must lie there!

Macbeth I can't go back there. It is too horrible.

Lady Give me the daggers. The dead are just painted pictures.

**She takes the daggers and leaves the stage. Macbeth stands centre and stares at his hands.**

Macbeth What have I done? The whole ocean couldn't wash the blood from these hands.

**Enter Lady Macbeth**

Lady M We must go. The dawn will come and find us still dressed. A little water clears us of this deed.

**They exit together. Guil, still dressed as a King, enters and stands behind Shakespeare. He looks over Shakespeare's shoulder as he continues to write. He doesn't look very pleased. Enter Ros and Macbeth.**

Macbeth Tonight we hold a solemn supper, my old friend, to celebrate my becoming King of Scotland. You will come?

Ros As surely as bears in the woods, sire. I am yours to command.

Macbeth Good. Are you riding this afternoon?

Ros I am, your majesty, with my son Fleance.

Macbeth Then go on and enjoy, and do not fail our feast!

Ros I will not, sire. Goodbye!

**Ros exits through the audience. Enter murderers. They huddle around Macbeth as he gives them instructions. They point where Ros went and agree the deal. Exit murderers through audience and Macbeth off stage. The lights black out.**

**There is the sound of horses' hooves, then shouts and a scuffle as Ros is murdered at the back of the audience. When the lights come back up Ros enters via the audience, brushing down his clothes. He joins Guil standing behind Shakespeare, who is still writing.**

Ros Is that the end, then?

Shak Er.. no. There's quite a bit more.

Ros But we're both dead.

Shak Yes, I know. But there's two more acts.

Guil I thought we were the main characters?

Shak Well yes, but your roles didn't go the way I thought they would.

Ros Macbeth's ended up with most of the lines.

Shak Look, sometimes I can't predict how a plot's going to develop. Sorry.

Guil At least you got more than one line.

Shak Your characters didn't really seem to work in the story after all. Your full potential didn't come out.

Guil That's an understatement.

Ros        It was a bit *too* dark, I think. We're men of letters and sparkling conversation.

Guil        I liked the first one myself.

Shak        I'll quickly finish this one and we'll think again.

**Lights dim and red. Menacing music starts. Enter Lady Macbeth in a night dress, sleepwalking. She is followed by a Doctor and Nurse. She wanders about the stage rubbing her hand.**

Lady M     Oh the guilt, the blood.

**She wanders off the stage followed by the Nurse and Doctor. Enter Macbeth with sword. Enter Messenger**

Mess        Sire, the Queen is dead.

Macbeth    Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. At least no-one can kill me unless Birnham Wood comes to the castle.

**Exit Messenger. The four trees rush in from the back, through the audience and assemble at the foot of the stage.**

Macbeth    Damn.

**Enter Messenger.**

Mess        Sire, the trees..

Macbeth    Yes, I know. Go away. At least no-one born of a woman can kill me.

**Exit Messenger. Enter Macduff.**

Macduff    Guess what.

**They fight and Macbeth is killed. Macduff drags the body off the stage, followed by the trees, muttering. Shakespeare finishes with a flourish and puts down the pen.**

## Scene Four

Lights up to white.

Guil      You lost interest in that one, didn't you.

Shak      I can come back to it later.

Ros      What about us?

**Hamlet wanders on stage with a skull.**

Hamlet    There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy

**Exit Hamlet**

Guil      Horatio? I thought we were...

Ros      What's his problem?

Shak      He's another one. I made him up a couple of years ago, but the story's just too tragic. It wouldn't work on the stage. Too much death. He wanders about in my head but I can't find a place for him at the moment.

Guil      Surely you couldn't get much worse than that last one. The two main characters were dead by the second act!

Shak      No. His story's much worse. *(reaching for another scroll)* There's this one I've been working on. It's much more suited to you two. Listen: two young people from rival families fall in love. The young man's friend tries to keep him out of trouble but the main character, the girl's cousin, is determined to fight him and prevent the romance.

Guil      There isn't a fairy Queen is there?

Shak      No

Ros      I'd give up on that one if I were you.

Guil      You weren't there.

Lights fade to warm moonlight. Sound of crickets.

**Enter the four trees; Sycamore carrying a battered script. They cluster to make an orchard downstage. Juliet climbs the stepladder and sits at the top. Exit Guil. Ros moves to upstage centre and joins Benvolio. They pace up and down shouting for Romeo.**

Ben      Romeo! Romeo! Come out; we're moving on! Cousin Romeo!!

Ros If he is wise he has stolen home to his bed.

Ben He ran down here and leapt over this orchard wall.

Ros Romeo! Romeo! Madman! Passionate lover! At least call out one word to tell us you are there!

**In the background the balcony scene begins, with Juliet standing and looking down at Romeo. There is conversation but it can't be heard for Ros and Ben talking.**

Ben If he can hear you he'll only become angry.

Ros Come out, come out friend Romeo! The charms of the beautiful Rosalyne await you!

Ben He might have gone the other way.

Ros Come on, let's look elsewhere, though I think he does not mean to be found.

**Exit via audience.**

Romeo Oh speak again bright angel. Thou art glorious to this night, like the moon and the stars.

Juliet What man are you that hides amongst the trees at night?

Romeo I dare not tell you my name.

Juliet I know it already. You are Romeo, whom I saw at the Ball, and a Montague. Are you not?

Romeo I am neither, if you dislike the name.

Juliet What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. How did you come into the orchard? These walls are high.

Romeo Stony limits cannot hold love out. I flew on the wings of love.

Juliet If my kinsmen find you they will kill you.

Romeo It is worth the risk, and besides it is dark.

**Enter Benvolio and Ros from the audience. Romeo and Juliet go on talking but they cannot be heard.**

Ben Romeo! Cousin Romeo!

Ros I say we forget him for tonight. It's over an hour we've searched and I say he will not be found.

Ben You're right, and the night is still young.

Ros Yes, and there's much adventure to be had for two young lads on such a night.

Ben Come on!

**Exit, running.**

Juliet Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say goodnight 'til it be morrow!

**Romeo exits from the trees and exits through the audience with many a backward glance. Juliet comes down the ladder and exits.**

Ash I've got a good feeling about this one.

Oak Plenty of woodland scenes, do you think?

Ash It's heading that way. Hidden passion and running away to the woods.

Syc You could be right.

Elm Are we on in the next scene?

Syc *(consulting script)* Er..it's a street scene. There could be trees.

Elm Just stay around then, unless something gets said.

**Lights bright and sunny.**

**The trees rearrange into a row along a street. Enter Ros and Benvolio.**

Ben Is this the right way? I don't remember these trees.

Ros This is where we came yesterday. I know it by the houses.

Ben The Capulets are out looking for trouble, so my manservant told me this morning.

Ros I'm ready for them.

Ben I am not for fighting today.

Ros Not for fighting? Who is this speaking? Could this be the same Benvolio that I know?

Ben It is too hot and too fine a day, Rosencrantz

Ros It will be a different story in a minute. Look!

**Enter Guil and Petruchio.**

Ben By my head, here come the Capulets.

Ros By my heel, I care not.

Guil Follow me close, I will speak to them. Gentlemen, a word with one of you?

Ros One word? And would that be a good word? Or a word coupled with a blow?

Guil You will find me ready enough for that sir. What say you?

Ros I say not a word, sir. You approached me.

Guil Rosencrantz, I know that you consort with Romeo.

Ros Consort? You make me out to be a wandering minstrel, sir. I consort with no-one, but if you mean to dance, this should make you! *(draws his sword)*

**Guil draws his sword and they circle each other aggressively.**

Now this is the kind of role I was written for, wouldn't you say?

Guil Yes, I think we're on to a winner this time.

**Enter Romeo. Guil sees him and lowers his sword.**

Peace to you sir, here comes the man I seek. Romeo! Come and face me! You have insulted my family!

Romeo Guildenstern, I have good reason to be at peace with you. I intend no insult to your family.

Guil Not good enough! Draw and fight like a man!

Romeo I have not injured thee, and I will not fight thee.

Ros What?

Ben Gentlemen, let's walk away from this.

Ros Walk away? We're not walking away from this. Turn and draw Guildenstern!

**They fight back and forth. Ros is struck and falls down.**

Guil Let's go!

**Exit Guildenstern and Petruchio, running. Benvolio and Romeo rush to Ros's aid.**

Ros I don't believe this.

Ben Rosencrantz, are you hurt?

Ros There must be some mistake.

Romeo Get him in the shade of these trees.

**They move him. He cries out in pain.**

Ros It can't be more than a scratch.

Ben He's dead.

Ros No I'm not.

Ben Nearly dead.

Ros No, it's just a scratch, look. *(He is covered in blood) Aaaahhh! (Dies, dramatically)*

Romeo Now he's dead. Brave Rosencrantz fallen, and only the first act! I shall revenge this untimely outrage!

**Benvolio and Romeo drag Ros across the stage near Shakespeare. Enter Guildenstern.**

Guil Did somebody say he's dead?

Romeo Aye, dead, and by your own hand.

Guil That can't be right.

Romeo And now you shall answer for it and join him!

Guil He's maybe just sleeping.

Romeo I know a dead Rosencrantz when I see one.

**They fight and Guil falls. Ben rushes in and restrains Romeo.**

Ben Romeo, this is madness. Now two lie dead! You must flee from the city. The Prince will have you executed otherwise.

**Exit both. Guil lies still for a while. Ros gets up and joins Shakespeare and they both look at Guil.**

Shak Sorry about that.

Ros Don't tell me; it didn't go the way you planned.

Shak      Sometimes the story takes over.

**Ros goes over to Guil and helps him up. They sit on the stools.**

Guil      I suppose he said the story took over.

Ros      Let it go.

Guil      So what now? Are we back to flipping coins?

Ros      At least there's some consistency

Guil      Meaning?

**Ros flips a coin. He picks it up and looks at it.**

Ros      Heads.

**Enter Hamlet, with the skull. He sits down on the other stool and leans over to them.**

Hamlet    Speak the speech just as I say it to you. Gently but insistent, enough to make the groundlings weep but not too showy and theatrical. I cannot abide overacting.

Guil      It would be nice just to get the chance.

Ros      Why are you carrying a skull around with you?

**Hamlet looks at the skull.**

Hamlet    This? This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

Ros      Is that why he's grinning?

Hamlet    Alas, poor Yorick; I knew him, you know. A man of infinite jest. He bore me on his back a thousand times, and now – this is all that is left.

**Hamlet gets up and wanders off the stage. Ros gets up and goes over to Shakespeare.**

Ros      What's *his* story then?

Shak      Oh, the usual thing. You know; Father murdered by Uncle, who marries his Mother and becomes King. Ghost of the father tells the Son what happened and he spends the rest of the play agonising over it. Then everyone dies.

Ros      Sounds great..... What do you do for fun?

Shak I invented *you* didn't I? He was just an early experiment. He won't come to anything.

Ros I feel sorry for him.

Guil Is he mad?

Shak It's a theory.

Ros So what about us?

Shak I'm working on it. I just want to finish this.

**Enter a pallbearers carrying Juliet on a stretcher. They lay her down up stage centre. Ros and Guil move out the way. The procession leaves.**

Guil More death.

Shak She's not really dead.

Guil Okay.

**There is the sound of a fight offstage. Ros and Guil look at each other then hurry off to see what's going on. There is a final thud of a body falling, then Romeo enters. He sees Juliet and kneels beside her.**

Romeo Oh no. Juliet, my love. Death has taken the honey of your breath, but it has not yet conquered your beauty. Your lips and cheeks are still crimson.

**Ros and Guil speak from offstage. While they are speaking Romeo is taking poison from a little bottle. He dies. Juliet wakes and finds Romeo. She takes his dagger and stabs herself.**

Guil There's another dead body over here.

Ros Well who's that?

Guil Probably another major character.

Ros Who killed him?

Guil Probably a minor character. Isn't that the pattern?

Ros You're becoming a cynic. Hey, did somebody just go in to that tomb?

Guil I don't think so. Not much gets past us.

**Enter Ros and Guil to find Romeo and Juliet dead.**

Ros      Oh no!

Guil     I thought she wasn't dead.

Shak     Sorry. Slip of the pen.

**They look at each other in a resigned manner and sit up on the stools.  
Funeral music plays as the pallbearers return and take away Romeo and Juliet one at a time.**

## *Scene Five*

**Lights up to full**

Ros I think we're more suited to comedy.

Guil Do you *do* comedy?

Ros He wrote you didn't he?

Guil That's cheap

Ros Sorry.

**Ros takes out his bag of money and starts flipping coins. They are always heads. Guil picks them up, announces them and puts them in his bag. The sound of wind blowing slowly builds up.**

Funny how your fortunes can change. I started out in quite a good mood this morning.

Guil Sometimes you can think about things too much.

**Lights fade to stormy. A flash of lightning and clap of thunder. Enter Trinculo lurching across the stage from one side to the other, shouting.**

Trinc Save yourselves!

**Ros and Guil watch him go past, look at each other then return to the game. The sound of a storm builds.**

Ros It's the uncertainty I find difficult.

**Trinculo and several Sailors and Captain lurch back across the stage**

Captain Down with the topmast! Lay hold of those ropes!

Trinc We're sinking!

**Again Ros and Guil watch them go past. The storm gets very loud. A sail flaps and the waters begin to splash across the deck. Lightning flashes and thunder rolls.**

Guil What's going on?

Ros I've got a sinking feeling about this. Come on.

**They get up and head off after the sailors. Guil hesitates just before he leaves the stage, returns and picks up a coin, then runs off in the other direction. General confusion of lights and storm sounds and cries from offstage. Sailors run back and forth. Enter Ros dressed as a Prince and clearly terrified.**

Ros Hell is empty and all the devils are here! Save us!

He falls off the front of the stage and is swept away through the audience by the waves.  
 Guil staggers on to the stage carrying a wine bottle and exits through the audience.  
 Trinc follows behind. The storm dies down.  
 Lights brighten to sunny and warm.  
 Enter the four trees, who arrange themselves along the back.

Oak I don't like the look of this one.

Elm What's wrong with it?

Oak There's a saw and an axe over there, and a big pile of branches.

Syc I'm okay, my sort don't burn very well.

Ash They're not that choosy when they're marooned on an island.

Oak Ssh, someone's coming.

Enter Prospero, followed by Ros carrying logs. He indicates a space downstage right.

Prosp Stack them over here. I will check on your work this afternoon.

Ros puts the logs in the space then goes off for more. He continues to bring logs on and to pile them up during the next scene. Enter Miranda, who sits on a stool downstage and watches him. Enter Caliban with a bundle of sticks.  
 Lights fade to stormy. Thunder rolls.

Cal All the infections that the sun sucks up out of bogs, fens and flats on Prospero fall and make him by inch-meal a disease! All the charms of Sycorax; toads, beetles, bats light on you! Oh no! Who comes? It's one of his spirits to torment me!

Enter Trinculo via the audience. Caliban looks into the audience, sees Trinculo and in fright he climbs under his cloak.

Trinc Oh no, another storm coming and no shelter in this cursed place.  
*(climbs on to the stage)* What's this? A man or a fish? *(sniffs)* A fish!  
 A very old fish me thinks.

Thunder rolls again and the wind builds.

Oh no, oh no! I'll just have to hide under here.

He climbs under the blanket, to squeals of fright from Caliban. Enter Guil via audience carrying a bottle of wine and obviously the worse for drink.

Guil *(sings)* I shall no more to sea to sea, Here I shall die ashore..

Cal Don't torment me any more!

Guil What? Who's there? *(climbs on to stage)* What is this?

Cal Help! Please don't torture me!

Guil This must be some monster of the island! Four legs. and in pain, apparently. Here, this will make you feel better.

**He offers the bottle to Caliban, who takes a sip.**

Trinc Who's there?

**Guil jumps back in fright.**

Guil Four legs and two voices! Saints preserve me!

Trinc Is that you Guildenstern? Guildenstern the butler?

Guil Um, yes ..apparently.

**Trinculo jumps up and they dance about in recognition. Caliban sits up and watches them in wonder.**

Trinc I thought you were surely drowned!

Guil I nearly was. I was saved by a barrel of the ship's best wine! Here, try some!

**Trinculo tries the wine.**

Trinc Have you any more of this?

Guil A whole barrel of it, man! Come on, I'll show you where I've hidden it.

**Trinculo and Guildenstern head off the stage taking swigs from the bottle. Caliban watches them go.**

Cal These are surely Gods fallen from Heaven, and bringing heavenly liquor with them! Wait! Wait for me my masters!

**Exit.**

## *Scene Six*

**Miranda is watching Rosencrantz carry logs. Eventually she gets up and bars his way.**

Miranda I pray you, do not work so hard. Sit down and rest.

Ros I mustn't stop. Your father gave me only this afternoon to move the entire pile of wood, and I am only half-way through.

Miranda But you are exhausted already. And besides, my father always goes to his study in the afternoons. He will not be back for three hours.

Ros He'll punish me if it isn't done

Miranda Then I will carry some of the wood while you rest.

Ros I can't sit around while you work. Alright, I'll rest for a few minutes. Thank you.

**They sit upstage centre on the stools.**

Miranda My father is not a cruel man, but we have lived alone on this island for so long that he has forgotten how to deal with people.

Ros How long have you been here?

Miranda Since I was just a baby. We were cast adrift in a rotting boat by my cruel Uncle and left to die. A storm washed us up here.

Ros We were washed ashore too, my friends and I.

Miranda My father has told me of the many places in this world, but I have only ever known this island. Besides my father, you are the first living person I have ever seen.

Ros There is my whole ship's company somewhere here, if they survived.

Miranda There are more like you? Oh brave new world that has such people in it! Are you a King?

Ros Er.. no, I'm a Prince.

Miranda A Prince!

Ros Yes. Quite an important Prince, of course. One of the main characters.

Miranda I knew you were someone great when I first saw you. I have long dreamed of loving a Prince.

Ros Really?

Miranda What did you think when you first saw me?

Ros Well.. now that you mention it..

Guil *(offstage)* Leave my friend alone!

Ros Oh no!

**Guil rushes on to the stage brandishing his wine bottle. Miranda jumps up in fright.**

Guil Don't worry, I'm here to save you, my Prince!

Ros Not now..

Guil Be gone you evil spirit! Leave him!

Ros She's not an evil spirit.. wait, come back!

**Miranda flees in terror, with Guil chasing her. Trinculo and Caliban run on, followed by Hamlet and his skull.**

Trinc Where did they go?

**Ros points off stage. They exit, running. Enter Guil, panting.**

Guil The island is full of noises...

Ros You did that deliberately..

Guil What?

Ros Just because ---

**Shakespeare suddenly screws up the paper and throws it into the audience.**

Shak This isn't working at all.

**Ros and Guil look around at him, confused**

Guil What? What happened?

Ros Looks like the meter's run out again.

Shak It's just like all the others.

Guil I was enjoying that.

Ros        So was I.

Shak      It needs something else.

Guil      A different writer?

Shak      Maybe if there was a Roman Emperor living in a cave, or someone being chased by a bear.

Ros        *(looking around)* Bear?

Shak      Ah, that sounds promising...

**He sits back down and starts to write.**

## *Scene Seven*

**Shakespeare continues to write. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz watch him for a while then look away, bored.**

- Guil      I'm beginning to wonder whether I want to do this at all.
- Ros      What's the alternative?
- Guil      Well, that's the question. Whether it's nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..
- Ros      Or?
- Guil      Or... I don't know, take arms against a sea of troubles?
- Ros      And by opposing, end them!
- Guil      Yes
- Ros      To die?
- Guil      To... sleep.

**Shakespeare looks up with interest and starts to copy down what they are saying**

- Ros      To sleep. Okay, but perchance to dream?
- Guil      Aye, but there's the rub! For what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause.
- Ros      The dread of something after death.
- Guil.      Yes. It makes us rather bear those ills we have than..
- Ros      Than fly to others we know not of?
- Guil      Indeed.
- Ros      So conscience does makes cowards of us all?
- Guil      Speak for yourself.
- Ros      Don't tell me you're not afraid of dying.
- Guil      You get used to it after a while. But it would still be nice to have a happy ending.

**Enter Hamlet.**

Ros Hello mate.

Hamlet I saw him at prayer.

Ros Really? Who?

Hamlet The King, my Uncle. I thought 'now might I do it, now he's at prayer'

Guil And did you?

Hamlet I couldn't make up my mind.

**Exit Hamlet. Ros and Guil watch him leave, then look across at Shakespeare, who is also watching him.**

Guil Can't you do something about him?

Shak Like what?

Guil I don't know.. Personality transplant?

Ros I know!

Guil What?

Ros Listen to this. He's a troubled moody teenager with a tragic past and potential psychiatric problems looking for a positive role model, right?

Shak Er.. right

Ros And we are two intelligent, articulate, forward-looking men of the world who need the right context in which to be heroes, right?

Shak Well..

Ros So here's your perfect plot which solves both problems.

Guil What does 'articulate' mean?

Shak Go on, enlighten me.

Ros We are two old college friends of his who are invited by the King and Queen to stay at the Palace and help him get over his problems. While we're there we prove ourselves perfect and wise counsellors, helping the son back on to his feet, advising the King and Queen on complex political and moral dilemmas, and leading armies to a series of stunning victories over the Country's enemies. We return as the saviours of the Nation, marry beautiful Princesses-

Guil Or Fairy Queens..

Ros and live in rich Palaces visited by foreign Kings and—

Shak Yes, I think I get the idea.

Ros What do you think?

Shak I think it could work, but it won't be easy.

Guil You can do it. We *are* the best characters you've ever invented. You said it yourself.

Shak Yes, I did, didn't I. Two college friends, you think?

Ros Yes, summoned by the King to cheer him up.

Shak What should I call you?

Ros *(pointing at Guil, then himself)* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Guil *(pointing at himself, then at Ros)* Yes, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz.

**Shakespeare looks blank for a moment as he tries to make sense of this, then decides it doesn't matter which is which.**

Shak Okay, leave it with me.

**Shakespeare starts to write. Exit Ros and Guil.**

**Lights shift to inside a castle. Courtly music. Enter Hamlet.**

Hamlet *(looking offstage)* My excellent good friends!

**Enter Ros and Guil**

How are you both?

Ros My honoured Lord, we are most well.

Hamlet What's the news with you? How come you to Elsinore?

Guil It's a long story.

Hamlet Do tell.

**Exit. Shakespeare writes for some time. The lights dim.**

## *Scene Eight*

Lights dim to bright cold moonlight.

The sound of seagulls, wind and sea and shipboard sounds. Enter Guil, lurching slightly. He crosses the stage, climbs the ladder and vomits loudly off stage on the other side. Enter Ros, looking unwell and swaying.

Guil I'm getting a sinking feeling about this.

Ros Just tell me again what Hamlet actually said

Guil He said to go on ahead of him and he's going to catch us up.

Ros We're on a boat. How will he catch us up?

Guil Oh, I didn't think of that.

Ros Great. Now what do we do?

Guil He said he wouldn't be long.

Ros We're on a boat sailing to England with letters to the King explaining that we're accompanying Hamlet the Prince of Denmark, who's "going to catch us up later".

Guil I can see the problem now

Ros This isn't going well.

Guil At least we're not sinking.

Ros That's true...

Guil And the forecast is good.

Ros I suppose.

Guil Look on the bright side.

Ros What is the bright side again?

Guil Well, we *are* the main characters this time.

Ros That's true, though I've heard it before.

Guil What's the worst that could happen?

Ros Nothing would surprise me.

**Exit Ros, swaying. Guil is about to leave when he notices a coin lying on the deck. He crosses to the coin and picks it up, straining to see it. His face suddenly brightens in triumph and he hurries after Ros holding the coin up.**

Guil        Look! Wait! Look what it is!

**Exit.**

## *Scene Nine*

**Enter King, Queen, and various members of the Court. A Messenger is reading the last part of a scroll to them as they enter.**

Mess. ..and thus were the said Rosencrantz and Guildenstern taken on the King's order to the Tower of London and executed by hanging.

King Thank you.

**Exit Messenger. Enter Hamlet and Laertes, fighting with swords. The fight back and forward, with first one and then the other winning the fight.**

**The Queen crosses to Shakespeare's desk and picks up the wine goblet. The King reacts, but it's too late and she takes a drink. She chokes and begins to struggle, then falls and dies. Court members gather around her.**

**Hamlet is distracted by this and Laertes cuts him with his sword. Hamlet, in a rage, attacks Laertes and kills him. Hamlet then rushes to kneel by the dead Queen. He looks up at the King.**

Hamlet Poison! You've poisoned her!

**Hamlet attacks the King and kills him. He then falls dead himself, poisoned by the sword cut. Enter Horatio, who kneels by Hamlet and lifts his head and shoulders.**

Hamlet The rest is silence.

**Shakespeare finishes writing, reads it over, then crumples the paper up and throws it in the bin. He pauses, as if about to say something to the audience, then changes his mind. He blows out the candle and leaves the stage and the lights fade to black.**