First Person: Dramatizing *Shake-speare's Treason*

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During the joint conference of the Shakespeare Oxford Society and the Shakespeare Fellowship at Ann Arbor, Michigan, in November 2006, I delivered a paper that included a recitation of lines from *Shake-Speare's Sonnets*, the string of 154 numbered poems or little songs printed originally in 1609. Ever since April 2005, when my self-published edition of the *Sonnets* entitled *The Monument* had first appeared, I had entertained a vague idea of creating a stage presentation based on the book; and on this occasion I recited a dozen sonnets from memory in order to test this notion.

In part I wanted to demonstrate a longstanding popular theory that the author (viewed by me and most attendees as Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford) had recorded a personal story by means of sonnets arranged in chronological order, particularly within the opening series 1-126. Using whatever skills I retained as a former professional actor, I presented a dozen selected sonnets in their numerical order and without comment, trusting that my own interpretation of their autobiographical and historical context would be conveyed.

To what degree the experiment was successful I cannot judge. Members with positive comments may already have been aware of my interpretation of those sonnets, making it therefore difficult to know how much of the story they understood based on my recitation alone. It came as a surprise when Ted Story, an Oxfordian with more than four decades of experience as an actor, director and producer in the New York professional theater, asked me whether I had ever thought about writing and performing a one-man show based on the dramatic narrative of the *Sonnets* as set forth in *The Monument*.

In fact I had entertained the notion, but without any clear vision of what such a show might be like. Would I wear a costume as the Earl of Oxford and address

the audience in character? Such was the hugely successful approach taken by Michael Dunn for *Sherlock Holmes and the Shakespeare Mystery*, a solo show in which, as the legendary detective, he guides his audience through a labyrinth of clues leading to the 17th Earl of Oxford as author of the Shakespeare works. The subject matter of any given show is unique, however, and my topic included the perception that Oxford used a special language in the *Sonnets* to record his reactions to circumstances and events within a radically new historical and biographical context. I told him I had no idea how to weave together such elements to create a show that might be both informative and entertaining, but Ted announced he would be happy to collaborate on a script and direct my performance of it.

"On the one hand," he said, "you believe you've discovered something new about the language and contents of the Shakespeare sonnets. That's your own story. On the other hand, you have Oxford's personal drama, as he tells it in the *Sonnets*, and the lines could become narration or dialogue. So there are two separate stories, one told directly by you and the other by Oxford in his private sonnets. The idea would be to incorporate both narratives into a single, unified script. That would be our challenge."

We discussed the motives for creating a show. My feeling was that it was time, after nearly twenty years as an active Oxfordian, for me to communicate with an audience beyond the memberships of our organizations. It was time to go back to my roots in the theater and find ways of using the stage to reach college students who know little or nothing about the "authorship question" in general or the Oxford theory in particular, as well as the general public. It was time to transform lectures into the stuff of theatrical experience, that is, to not only stir the minds of those in the audience but also touch their hearts.

Ted and I agreed that writing a show would require its own kind of exploration, that is, it would compel us to search for fundamental aspects of character and motive leading to the most basic necessity for the stage: the dynamics of dramatic conflict. I had already concluded that the Oxfordian movement had failed to gain general acceptance precisely because we had not supplied any agreed-upon convincing motive for the concealment of Edward de Vere's identity as Shakespeare. What forces would have been powerful enough to pull off the biggest literary hoax in history? What purpose must have been behind such a longstanding cover-up? What was the basic conflict and who was involved? Just as a jury needs to know the motive for a crime to convict someone of having committed it, I felt that the public needs to know why and how the authorship mystery came about in the first place. People need to understand the motives of those who were involved and how the real-life conflict was played out. In simple terms, what's the story?

Members of the Oxfordian movement have either lacked answers to these questions or have had opposing viewpoints that often develop into highly charged debates, seldom if ever being resolved. Why would Edward de Vere use a pen name? Why would he choose the Shakespeare pseudonym? Why would it be continued after his death? On these and other basic questions, Oxfordians have never arrived at anything resembling consensus; but the creators of a successful stage work must

dig for specific answers and, finally, come to an agreement about them. Even in the absence of any definitive evidence or proof, there must be a logical and plausible story to tell.

Ted and I agreed to work together to co-write a 90-minute one-man show that I would perform under his direction. We both live in New York and could meet at least once a week, either at his apartment in Manhattan or at my house in Nyack, and in between we would communicate by phone or email. Our goal was to translate the story of the *Sonnets* (as set forth in *The Monument*) into a viable dramatic presentation – and in that regard, we spent countless hours trying to find how to translate a 900-page work into an hour and a half of stage time. To put it mildly, we went down many trails in search of the best way to tell the tale the way we understood it; and in fact we tried several different avenues of approach without success.

A thorny problem was presented by my premise that the language of the *Sonnets* tells one story (fiction) on the surface while recording another (the all-important nonfiction chronicle) at the same time. It was Ted who came up with a crucial breakthrough on that front. "Last night I watched the movie *Venus* with Peter O'Toole on DVD," he said, referring to the 2006 film for which O'Toole had received his eighth Oscar nomination for Best Actor. "He recites Sonnet 18 – 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' – and I have to tell you, it's a beautiful love poem."

"I agree," I said, "but in my view it's *also* a political poem, with Oxford comparing the young Earl of Southampton to a *king* – because, in Shakespeare, kings are *suns* that create *golden* times of *summer days*."

"You've argued that before," Ted said, "but the point to emphasize is that *no one has to give up* the beautiful love poem, because that's just *one half* of a double image. The *other half* is political. So we can have *both* sides and we can switch back and forth, whenever we want. The love poetry never goes away."

What Ted had done was to take an idea that I had expressed in *The Monument* and in conference papers, and to simplify it. Although I had been an actor and had written for the stage before, it was still difficult for me to let go of my detailed explanations, which would never hold the attention of an audience trying to enjoy a show. The material had to be translated and transformed.

In November 2007, after working regularly for a year, we were still writing and shaping our script while I was also memorizing parts of it and rehearsing under Ted's direction. The first performance was already set for in February 2008, and I could not imagine being ready.

The show we created was entitled *Shake-speare's Treason*. We had passed through many titles before getting to that one. Our first title had been *The True Story of King Henry IX, Last of the Tudors*, but that became the subtitle. To our surprise the script fell naturally into three parts of about thirty minutes each, to be separated only by brief pauses. I would introduce myself by name and continue throughout in this directly personal vein, while telling the story of the *Sonnets* and acting out the dialogue with vocal changes indicating different speakers. From beginning to end I would use titles on an easel-like flip chart or present them on a screen by a

PowerPoint program in my control. As the show proceeded, I would increasingly use lines of the *Sonnets* to complement the narrated action. Our goal was for members of the audience to come to realize, in a visceral way, that they were hearing the voice of the true, flesh-and-blood author, emerging from behind his mask of William Shakespeare.

The premise of the show is that Oxford created the sequence of *Shake-Speare's Sonnets* to record for posterity that (1) Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, was his son by Elizabeth I of England; (2) he saved the younger earl's life and gained his freedom by vowing they would never acknowledge their father-son relationship, with Southampton also vowing to give up any royal claim; and (3) he had adopted the "Shakespeare" pen name for political reasons, in support of his son, but after the failure of the Essex Rebellion, he was forced to agree to forever bury his identity as the great poet-dramatist, to whose name he had linked Southampton for all time.

We held a dress rehearsal that February on a Sunday afternoon at my house, with a dozen persons seated in the living room, including my family. I started off fairly well, and then about twenty minutes later there was a terrible noise outside, caused by an unusual form of windstorm that rattled the windows and shook the walls. I kept performing; and at some point, after the mysterious storm disappeared, I realized that my son Jake had gone somewhere with his mother, my wife; and finally I noticed that two members of the audience had fallen asleep on the couch. Among the others sat Ted, who was clearly upset by my performance while trying to seem calm. The first show was scheduled to take place at a friend's home in Nyack just three nights hence and, by all reckoning, it was going to be a disaster.

A few years earlier I had spoken about Edward de Vere to several Nyack residents at one of their homes. A member of the group, Peter Huber, had kept in touch; and on the night of February 12 he and his wife,Thelma, hosted the first performance of *Shake-speare's Treason* before an audience in their living room. There had been a blizzard that day and it was still snowing, but thirty-five adults arrived by seven-thirty and took their seats on chairs and couches. Back in the kitchen, I felt more than mildly nervous; never had I been on stage alone for ninety minutes, without any script or prompter, and my fear of forgetting everything seemed to build with every second. Having rehearsed many times with Ted, who had given me hundreds of notes, I knew it was possible to get through the show if only I didn't wind up fainting in the process.

Somehow it worked. I was out there looking at the different faces and could tell that my words were holding their attention. Behind those words were years of research and writing and discussion with Oxfordian colleagues; and I remembered that by contrast these folks knew virtually nothing about the authorship issue, much less about my radically new interpretation of the *Sonnets*. They had never heard anything remotely like what I was saying to them, but their attention was being held by the story itself; to put it simply, they just wanted to know what happened next.

As it became clear they were enjoying themselves, I grew increasingly relaxed until the show was suddenly over and they began to applaud. Most stayed for drinks and snacks, chatting about what they had just experienced and approaching me with

questions or feelings and ideas based on their own knowledge. The occasion had turned into a party bubbling with talk about history and literature and other subjects related to the Shakespeare authorship, as well as to the *Sonnets* and specific aspects of the show. A few persons expressed interest in attending the performance again, leading Peter and Thelma to begin planning for the next one.

Ted and I felt we had achieved one of our goals of communicating this complex subject matter to a general audience. We had grabbed attention not by delivering a lecture, but by presenting a more compelling story. In return we heard our own theme, about the value of knowing the truth, repeated over and over. Not once did anyone seriously challenge the contents of the show; rather, several asked how they might learn more. It occurred to me that we should have scripts for sale along with other printed materials such as lists of recommended reading. Some members of the audience might want to pursue the subject on their own and draw their own conclusions. It seemed our show had opened the door.

Less than a month later I flew west to perform *Shake-speare's Treason* at Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell, Montana, at the invitation of Brian Bechtold, a fellow Oxfordian and instructor of English and Theatre Arts. After much persistence Brian had obtained a slot for *Treason* as part of the College's 2008 Honors Symposium on "Lessons Learned: The Role of Humanities in a Free Society."

On the FVCC campus I was introduced to a state-of-the-art theater with some 250 tiered seats ringing three-fourths of the floor-level performance space. I met with the theater staff for a technical rehearsal to adjust the lighting and link up the sound system with my cordless body microphone. Instantly I was among dedicated students eager to lend their expertise under the supervision of production manager Joe Legate, who had created a thoroughly professional atmosphere.

I arrived early that evening and waited backstage. Symposium coordinator Ivan Lorentzen began his introduction: "It is only the humanities that provide the uniquely human perspective that offers the insight and wisdom needed to make wise and responsible decisions about the future. The humanities assure the well-being of society by providing both historical perspective and mental agility required to navigate change. Opening our series tonight is an author and former professional actor from New York…"

Hearing my name followed by applause, I took a deep breath and finally walked out to begin the show. Brian had told me that nearly all the seats would be filled by students, professors and local citizens; and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness beyond the stage, I could see the place was crowded. Ted had guided me to speak directly to the audience members and to be certain I had their attention. "This is stuff that most of them have never heard before," he said. "The material is complicated, combining history and literature, so the most important job you have is to be clear. You want them to follow your words as you go. They can think for themselves and talk about it later."

I was relaxed, in control of my space, speaking about Shakespeare in ways which, in other circumstances, most likely would have provoked hostility and scorn; but this crowd had come to be entertained and just possibly to learn something; they

wanted to have their minds and emotions stimulated in the course of experiencing some kind of narrative or dramatic story. During those ninety minutes I kept checking their faces, speaking to them directly, looking for feedback. In places that were funny, I found myself laughing along with them; as the story heated up and grew more serious, I tried to make sure they were taking the journey with me.

After it was over and the applause died down, I returned to the dressing room. When I found my way back to the stage, at least a few dozen members of the audience were still there, waiting to express their enthusiasm and talk about the subject matter and ask questions. There was excitement in the air as many of the students spoke to me about the value of truth in history, in politics, in life itself – a theme which, they had just learned, was that of Edward de Vere's motto, *Nothing Truer Than Truth*.

Over the next few days, speaking with students in several classrooms, it was clear the show had sparked curiosity and eagerness to learn more. I realized that our "college premiere" in Kalispell and the interactions with students could serve as a prototype of what might be arranged at other campuses in the future. Later I received some letters from students such as Jillian K. Vashro, who wrote:

> I don't quite know how to articulate just how inspiring your presentation was. You altered my whole perception of Shakespeare … It's such a wonderful puzzle that challenges not only how we approach Shakespeare's work, but theatre and history in general. You reminded us just how important it is to consider the whole picture.
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> I've always had a particular interest in context. I feel that I can't really know someone's work, no matter how universal it may be, until I know the environment it was created in. I was lucky to have several professors who encouraged their students to question and explore each subject, but there's still so much we take for granted and accept as fact. If such a universally accepted image as Shakespeare can still be shaken, who knows what else is out there begging for a second look?

Another letter came from David Crismore, who wrote:

> The story you told on stage that night at FVCC captivated me till the very end, at which I certainly remember standing up immediately to honor your remarkable performance … For many years I have come to hold importance in the truth of things. I strive to find what is true in this life, and what you have shared with me is no exception to my charge.

Brian Bechtold wrote to me as well:

> We Oxfordians often believe the best way to convince the public and academia that Edward deVere is the true author of the Shakespeare canon

> is through sound logic, clear reasoning and convincing evidence. That is, 'If they would just think about it, they would come to their senses.' We sometimes forget, however, that through times past, in all cultures, the *story* has been a powerful force in conveying emotions and ideas, a force capable of dislodging archaic ways of thinking and changing our world view.
> After watching and then reading Hank Whittemore's *Shakespeare's Treason* [a printed copy of the script] I believe his *story* does as much to advance the Oxfordian cause as any articulated argument. His story and delivery embraces the audience on a personal and emotional level first, just as stories did thousands of years ago, just as they did during Shakespeare's time. Once the audience is hooked viscerally, they will then begin to think about the logic and the evidence supporting our theory. Tell the story and they will listen.

About a month later, in April, we were back at the Hubers' house for another show in the living room; and among the thirty-eight members of the audience were three or four who had been at the previous performance.... among the crowd was William Neiderkorn of *The New York Times*, who, speaking only for himself, told me he'd found the show "delightful and thought-provoking." Later a few others told me they felt the authorship question and its history were vitally important; they wanted to absorb more information on this topic that was entirely new to them. Would they have signed up to attend a lecture on the Earl of Oxford as the true Shakespeare? Probably not, but a show was different; and at the reception, amid the animated conversations, other residents told me they would offer their homes as settings for more.

Later that August I traveled to Portland, Oregon's Gerding Theater. This performance was arranged for us by Professor Daniel Wright, director of the new Shakespeare Authorship Research Centre at nearby Concordia University, sponsor of the event. It was our world premiere in terms of presenting *Shake-speare's Treason* at a professional venue, in this case the home of Portland Center Stage, the well-known theater company. We used their small studio space, where I performed the show for about fifty persons, among them a number of friends and colleagues. There was no review in the local papers, since this was not the start of a run, but the response from this audience was positive and encouraging.

The next month in Nyack, local residents Sue Smith and Jen Hatch, having already attended one of the shows in the Hubers' living room, offered the use of their large Victorian home. On this night more than sixty folding chairs were filled by an assortment of invited guests, while I performed with my back to glass doors overlooking the Hudson River. It was a high-spirited, enthusiastic audience. This time, realizing that some spectators might want to have the show's information available to them later, we had printed and bound copies of the script for sale after the performance; and a few dozen copies were purchased.

In October we finally met with the New York theatrical world at Theatre Row Studios in Manhattan.

We billed the afternoon performance as a workshop presentation for producers and other theater professionals. Among the more than fifty individuals who attended were many whom Ted knew from his career as an actor, stage manager, producer and director. He wanted to find out the level of interest that might exist in supporting an off-Broadway production of *Shake-speare's Treason*.

In the audience was Mark Rylance, former artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in London, who had just won the Tony Award in June as best actor for his performance in the Broadway revival of *Boeing-Boeing*, in which he was still performing. Mark is founder and chairman of the London-based Shakespearean Authorship Trust, dedicated to learning the truth behind the Bard's works; and during the previous summer his rollicking comedy *The BIG Secret Live - "I am Shakespeare" - Webcam Daytime Chat-room Show*, featuring interviews with several authorship candidates (Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere, Mary Sidney and Mr. Shakespeare himself), had enjoyed a successful tour throughout England. After the show and in later discussions, Mark offered many thoughtful comments and helpful suggestions regarding both script and production; also, as a serious student of the authorship question, he initiated a private dialogue related to biographical and historical issues, always raising new questions – the way the best actors continue to explore the lives and motives of the characters they play.

The dozen or so producers who attended our workshop version of the show were thrilled by the story. Virtually all of them suggested it could be translated into a major motion picture; and we soon began work on a screenplay.

The next leg of our journey, however, would take us to the Globe Theatre in London, England in November.

Ted and I had already accepted an invitation by the Shakespearean Authorship Trust to stage the show as part of the John Silberrad Memorial Lecture Programme held each November at the Globe in an indoor venue. The series was presented in collaboration with Brunel University in Uxbridge, on the outskirts of London, which had just established an MA program in Shakespeare Authorship Studies, the first of its kind. Attending the performance were members of the DeVere Society of England, dedicated to conducting and publishing research regarding the Oxford theory, and others who were equally well-informed on issues related to Shakespeare and the authorship.

"I'm a little worried," I told Ted. "After all, this is a different audience. Most of these folks have studied the issue and have already come to their own conclusions about the particulars."

Ted reminded me that we were here to present a theatrical experience and to offer another perspective that might inspire new angles of research. He was right, I thought, recalling that I myself had enjoyed Amy Freed's popular play *The Beard of Avon*, despite the fact that I viewed its farcical treatment of the Shakespeare story as dangerously misleading, in terms of its depiction of the historical individuals and their motives. However, having had productions across the country since its premiere in 2001 (at the South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, CA), including a New York run, I thought Ms. Freed's play had done far more than our Oxfordian groups

had done to call widespread attention to the authorship question.

Relax, I thought, the play's the thing....

Sure enough, the Globe performance went well and its reception was positive. There was no time for a question-answer session afterward, but many audience members remained for animated discussions around the room. Dr. William Leahy, head of the MA program at Brunel, remarked to me that this was the first time he had heard the suggestion of a complete story being told within the Shakespeare sonnets; and he expressed the possibility of *The Monument* becoming part of classroom studies at the university.

Dr. Leahy also mentioned that James Shapiro, author of *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005), based on the orthodox biographical view, had been in the audience. Before leaving, Shapiro had commented about having "enjoyed" the show, which he had attended as part of research for a book about the authorship debate – a work, he reportedly has vowed, that will settle things in favor of the Stratford William Shakspere once and for all. Later, I emailed Professor Shapiro and thanked him for attending; but before I could ask about his reaction to *Shake-speare's Teason*, he explained that he had a policy of avoiding discussion about the authorship debate while working on his book.

The next day Ted and I traveled up to Cambridge University, where Oxfordian scholar Dorna Bewley had made arrangements for us to perform two successive shows at the 96-seat Bateman Auditorium of Gonville and Caius College. Bewley had put up posters all over town, and because of her efforts, we had an audience mostly comprised of friends on the first night and, for the second performance, a larger crowd that included many university students who had heard about the show.

In the reception room afterward, I became engaged in lively discussions with about a dozen students, some with questions that appeared to have been prepared in advance, perhaps by their professors:

Why are there so many allusions in the plays related to Warwickshire? To achieve high drama, wasn't it necessary to depict royalty and/or nobility, even if the playwright happened to be a commoner? How can you say that the blank space between the lines on the title page of the Sonnets was unique, when some other such spaces on other cover pages were also left blank?

As we exchanged our opposite viewpoints, the atmosphere was mutually cordial and respectful. I felt that, given time and more performances at Cambridge, our show might enjoy a fairly long run and spark a genuine university dialogue on the Shakespeare authorship. Next to Gonville and Caius is St. John's College, where Edward de Vere had received a Master of Arts degree 444 years earlier in August 1564; and with Ms. Bewley's help, we were able to visit the St. John's library and to see the young Lord Bolbec's name on the registry. "Just imagine," Ted remarked, "if these Cambridge folks realized that another one of their illustrious sons was 'William Shakespeare' himself." While it will take time to discover the extent to which these plans can be realized, I am sure that none would have a chance of coming to fruition had we not returned to our theatrical roots and brought this subject matter to the stage.