



multiplay
drama ▶

The Playhouse Apprentice

Jessica Swale

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Characters

ALLEYN/DR DEE
ACTOR PLAYING QUEEN ELIZABETH
ACTORS
LORD CHAMBERLAIN
BEN JONSON
FANNY
WILL
PORTER
PYGGE
PASSERSBY
ZEALOTS
MAGICIAN
SELLER
GIN SELLER
POLL
FORTUNE TELLER
WHERRYMEN
WOMAN
FISH SELLER
GRACE
EQUERRY
GILBERT
FERNANDO
QUEEN ELIZABETH

Scene One

The Isle of Dogs

London, 1597. Bankside Theatre.

A play, The Isle of Dogs, is mid-performance. The audience (actors sitting amongst the real audience) is loud and responsive. Onstage, the spooky magician DR DEE (played by ALLEYN) is casting a spell in front of QUEEN ELIZABETH (played by a man). Music. Drumming. Smoke. Weird sounds. It's all very theatrical. The actors play –

DEE (*chanting*).

Ecce hic per hoc,
Ecce hic per hoc.
I am Bornogo, this is my seale,
Behold, behold, the magick of the wheel!

DEE makes the sign of a wheel, and as he turns, music escalates and they both chant.

DEE/ELIZABETH.

Roto, roto, vertere!
Roto, roto, vertere!

The spell builds to climax, there's an explosion and suddenly DOG SPIRITS spill onto the stage from all sides, as if climbing up from hell, like something from a medieval fresco. ELIZABETH jumps back. The DOG SPIRITS begin to sing and dance, whilst DEE reassures ELIZABETH –

DOG SPIRITS (*singing*).

Ecce hic per hoc,
/ Ecce hic per hoc (*Etc.*)

DEE.

Your Majesty, you must not fear
These spirits for Your Grace appear.
Invoked from hell for this, my spell
In order to your future tell.

ELIZABETH.

These creatures here? Who, from the earth
Appear as though the ground gave birth?
They look to me like dirty dogs –
All black with soot and stench of bogs.

DEE.

My lady, don't you recognise
These hellhounds rough before your eyes?
These dogs your days do oft requent,
They are the hounds of parliament!

Stirrings in the audience, amongst whom is the LORD CHAMBERLAIN.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. What?

DOG CHORUS (*singing*).

Regina! We might appear
To bay and howl and drool and sneer
We are the same in human form,
We are the Queen's men, canine born.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN (*standing up in the audience*). Enough! Enough! This is an outrage.

DEE/ALLEYN (*dropping out of character*). Oh hell.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Cease this performance at once! I said STOP!

The music grinds to a halt. The ACTORS stop and look out over the audience.

How dare you?

ALLEYN. Sir?

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. What is the meaning of this lewdity?

ALLEYN. Lewdity? Sir, this is art.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Art?! It is sacrilege. I forbid it!

ACTORS. What? / No! (*Etc.*)

ALLEYN. But you have no right!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. I have every right, sir. (*Stepping into the light.*)

DOG 1. Oh, it's the Lord Chamberlain. I guess he does then.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. I hereby silence this play by Order of the Queen.

DOG 2. But the Queen's not here.

ELIZABETH. Yes I am!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. The real Queen. Who, madam, I'm sure would find your wig most offensive.

The ACTOR playing the Queen is hurt. He spent a long time saving for his wig.

Who wrote this droll spittle of a play?

BEN JONSON *emerges from backstage in a fish costume.*

BEN. I did, sir.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. You? And what are you meant to be? A haddock?

BEN. I'm Old Father Thames actually. In fact, I'm just about to make my entrance, and if you'd kindly allow us continue, in my opinion this is the best bit of the play –

ALLEYN. No it's not!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. What is your name, fish?

BEN. Jonson, sir. Ben Jonson, playwright, actor, entrepreneur. I play many parts, sir. My range expands beyond sea creatures.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Jonson? Never heard of you.

BEN. Sir. I have lots of ideas – I’ve one about an alchemist –

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. An alchemist?! BLASPHEMY!

BEN. It’s not, it’s very scientific! Besides it was Alleyn’s idea –

ALLEYN. No it wasn’t!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. You, Alleyn. I thought you’d know better. Tell me, what exactly is the meaning of this?

ALLEYN. Well, sir, actually it’s an allegory for the manner in which parliament fawns on the Queen / and –

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. I can see that, blockhead! I mean... how dare you so distainfully portray our Queen in such a pagan –

DOG 3. Hey!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Puerile –

DOG 5. What?

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Thick-headed, half-baked, witless baseless slop bucket of a supposed ‘entertainment’. I hereby decry this sordid text banned.

DOG 1. Banned?

DOG 4. But it’s funny.

DOG 5. It’s only a satire, sir.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. *Only* a satire? Satire is a stain on a God-loving society. A scourge. A pustulant wound. A gaping orifice of dirge. To poke fun for idle pleasure at the bastions of our city? To scorn your betters for the amusement of peasants and wantons? Explain to me what’s funny about depicting our honourable parliament as a herd of unwashed dogs.

DOG 6. We have to be unwashed –we’re hellhounds.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Hellhounds?! Invocation of the Devil?!

ALLEYN. Douglas!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Blasphemy! Close the place down.

ALLEYN. Sir!

BEN. You can’t do that!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN. Oh yes I can. I am the Lord Chamberlain, sir. I can do what I like. This theatre is dust. Everybody OUT!

The LORD CHAMBERLAIN leaves, followed by his cohort. The ACTORS watch him go in disbelief. Cut to –

Scene Two

Crisis Management

Cut to – the theatre company, who are all gathered: ACTORS, CREW, DRESSERS, etc. in a state of crisis.

ACTOR 1. Well, what'll we do?

BEN. What do you mean, what'll we do? What can we do? Nothing!

ALLEYN. There's always something can be done. I think. I hope...

BEN. But what, I beg you? He's banned the stage! We shouldn't even be in here. However you look at it, he's pretty much made mud of us.

ACTOR 2. I can't believe he didn't think we were funny. We are funny! Aren't we?

ALLEYN. Yes, you were funny.

FANNY. And I spent blooming ages on those dog costumes. If he had any idea how long it takes to sew tails onto forty-three mangy dog arses –

ALLEYN. Enough, Fanny. We need to think logically. If we're on or off is up to the Lord Chamberlain. And that is final. So –

ALL. So? / What? (*Etc.*)

ALLEYN. So we'll have to make him change his mind.

ACTOR 3. But how? You know what he's like.

ACTOR 4. He'd ban the virgin birth if it wasn't in the bible.

ACTOR 5. Really, last year I showed my ankle and he had me up for nudity.

ACTOR 6. Why's it up to him anyway? He's just some stiff with no sense of humour whose only joy is to ensure everyone else is miserable!

BEN. And he's doing a mighty fine job of it.

ALLEYN. There must be something... (*Pause.*) I know. We'll mount a campaign.

ACTOR 7. Riot!

ALLEYN. No, not a riot. They already think we're heathens. They have to take us seriously.

ACTOR 8. But we're comedy players.

WILL. Speak for yourself. I'm going to write a tragedy.

ACTOR 8. Why?

WILL. Why? Because it's the highest form of art. It's about a Scottish King and his determined wife – I based her on you, Fanny.

FANNY. Ah, Will? There's nice. I like that.

ACTOR 8. Hasn't it got any jokes in it?

WILL. Of course not. It's a tragedy.

ALLEYN. You'll have to put *some* in, Will. Everyone likes a good joke.

PORTER. Put me in it. 'Knock knock. Who's there?'

WILL. What would you know about theatre? You're only the porter.

ALLEYN. Back to it, you.

PORTER (*exiting*). I could be funny. I pray you, remember the porter. (*Exits.*)

BEN. So, Alleyn? What do you suggest?

ACTOR 9. Go on, sir.

ALLEYN. Well, the problem is, he doesn't understand it – what we do. The magic of it. He thinks it's just frippery. Frills on a petticoat.

FANNY. I like a bit of frill on a petticoat.

ALLEYN. I mean he doesn't see why theatre is important.

BEN. It's important because it pays our coins, that's why.

ACTOR. Mercenary.

ALLEYN (*realising*). Maybe that's it!

BEN. What?

ALLEYN. He's never going to understand the joy of it –

ACTOR 5. He's got about as much joy in him as a pickled newt.

ALLEYN. Exactly. We must put the case forward in a way he understands. This is our livelihood. Our living. It pays our way. And by closing us down there's a dozen, more – a full score of souls who'll be without bread. We must sign a petition.

ACTOR 3. A petition?

ACTOR 4. Of course! Strength in numbers.

ALLEYN. And we must take it to the palace. And deliver it to the Privy Council. To the Lord Chamberlain himself. And tell him – this is not just a fart in a pottle to us. This is our lives!

BEN. By God, man, you might just have it. We must all sign.

ALLEYN. Ben, the paper! Are you with me?

CHORUS. Yes! / We're with you! / Of course! / Hurrah! (*Etc.*)

BEN gets paper and begins to scribe. Everyone signs as ALLEYN continues.

ALLEYN. Sign it, everyone, come along, and you, Fanny. Now, all we need is to choose the man to deliver it.

Everyone volunteers at once.

BEN. I'll do it –

CHORUS. No I'll do it – / Me, me, me – / Let me – / I want to see the Queen – / I've never been to the Palace – (*Etc.*)

ALLEYN. Our man will have to be confident. Brave. Assured. He must step up to the court with the conviction of Paul...

BEN. Paul? But he –

ALLEYN. – on his way *back* from Damascus.

ACTOR 3. I shall do it.

ACTOR 4. No, I!

BEN. No, I! I'm the writer.

ALLEYN. He shall have to look the part.

ACTOR 5. Me, me!

ALLEYN....speak with the nimbleness of a poet...

ACTOR 6. Pick me, pick me!

ALLEYN....and brave the mortal terrors of Blackfriars –

All the enthusiasm stops at once. Everyone's hands drop –

– on his perilous way.

They turn away and pretend to be busy.

So who's in? Volunteers?

Silence.

CHORUS. Oh actually I'm busy... / I'm washing my wig... / I've just remembered I've got something on... (*Etc.*)

...as they all turn to look for someone to suggest. And there, the only person still moving, is the young apprentice, PYGGE, who has been painting a piece of scenery in the background. As he continues painting, humming to himself, everyone turns to focus on him. PYGGE finishes, puts his paintbrush away, and realises everyone's looking at him.

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