

Love's Labour's Lost

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Edited by Felicia Hardison Londré

SHAKESPEARE, HALF OF CREATION

REMINISCENCES OF DON ARMADO*

Péter Huszti

Stratford! Green lawn, fresh-cut grass, weeping willow, plants, barges, preening swans, a theatre, a church, tortuous streets—on which he walked! A half-timber house—where he was born! Chairs, beds, kitchen utensils, pens, books: things we want to believe, and so we do believe that each of them belonged to him. A small town, which he escaped from, and later escaped back to, and there finished his life. Shakespeare's country!

Could he have known that this land would all become known as his, just as theatres, companies, and festivals are named after him?

Could he have known that centuries later the greatest excitement for directors, actors, actresses, and audiences anywhere in the world would be to perform his dramas, to listen to them, to see them?

Could he have lived a life encompassing as much as he knew about the world? About love, friendship, hate, jealousy, desires, dreams, politics, and power. About youth, age, boys, girls, men, women; about us. If a Shakespeare play cuts such a big doorway into life, and a major Shakespeare role cuts so deeply into the actor, what if he had actually struggled through the events of those tragedies and comedies in his life? Oh, God!

In the opinion of the great Hungarian poet Sándor Petöfi, Shakespeare is half of Creation. And I have come to realize that one who thinks about Shakespeare thinks about life, and one who thinks about life is thinking about the self.

The moment I first knew I was an actor and the most important stations in my life as an actor belonged to Shakespeare. As a green student actor, I had already started to flirt with the Master. On that little practice stage, I fearlessly tackled the maddening story of Macbeth, I had a turn as Petruchio in a short scene opposite a long-legged girl, and I got to strut and fret my hour upon the stage as Malvolio. But I was only twenty and understood nothing.

The third year of training got me a student actor's backstage pass and the chance to appear on the stage of the Madách Theatre. Whether it was set with the castle at Elsinore or the forest in *As You Like It*, it seemed so vast.

And then there were so many figures created out of dirt and sunshine, into whose skins I have slipped, and who have slipped under mine. Of them all, the most interesting were the roles provided by the great Shakespeare. With them I have walked the most dangerous paths. With them I suffered and struggled most, and fell the farthest and flew the highest. Through them I learned the most about life, and I started to know myself.

How many hot, crazy, magical, dreadful nights he gave me! On mid-summer night, as Demetrius, overcome by the love potion, I ran up and down in ecstasy in the woods outside Athens. In *Troilus and Cressida*, honest Hector—whose tragedy was precisely his clarity—lent me his fortitude. Petruchio and I met again, and once again he swept me into a painful, strange, cruel comedy, using the latest techniques of “mind-clearing” to find some accommodation with the stubborn Kate. The rich, abundant, and sorrowful story of *Twelfth Night*—a play in which the Poet's magic touch can instantly transform an ecstatic roar into numbing silence—gave me my favorite alter ego: Sir Toby Belch, who longs for friendship and love, and kills his bitterness in wine, beer, brandy, and wild carousing. Hamlet and Iago. Heaven and earth! In monumental stories that shake heaven and earth I came dangerously too close. The cruel story of King Lear, who became wise in his madness, who became a man through suffering, coursed through me and forced me to see myself.

Seventeen years ago I was that “fantastical Spaniard,” Don Adriano de Armado. For 150 nights the story of *Love's Labour's Lost* brought from the audience gurgles of delight, rapturous applause, roaring laughter, and the sudden silence of embarrassment. After all this time I remember vividly the tingling, forgiving flow of love coming from the darkness of the auditorium to reach my gallant gentleman who again and again set out to fight the battle of love. His energy still penetrates my body and soul.

Before I go into that story, I must pause to repeat the commonplace that the theatre exists to serve the audience. We play to the audience, with them, for them, and—often, more importantly, especially when it's Shakespeare—representing them. It's actually impossible to play Shakespeare without the participating presence of the audience. Their eagerness before the opening curtain, their laughter, weeping, applause, and silence are part of the joy of being an accomplice in the action. Our audiences in Budapest and throughout Hungary have the impudence and insight to expose themselves bravely to daring approaches, thereby giving their directors and actors the

impetus to attempt new interpretations. This is the audience that claims Shakespeare for their own, crowning him eternal king of the Hungarian stage regardless of social or political systems or various fashions and movements with names ending in “-ism.”

To tackle the comedies of Shakespeare is a formidable task. For the actor, it is a journey fraught with peril, through a jungle of mysteries and pitfalls, orchids and snakepits. What is the true nature of Shakespeare’s comedies? They might be described as airy, sweet, ethereal. But for all their poetry, virtuoso wit, and lightness, they are at the same time quite earthbound. There is in them coarse humor, overheatedness, filthy talk, slushy erotics, and savageness. There is cruelty in the battle of the sexes. Just when one becomes entranced by the lightness and sparkle, then all hell breaks loose. In the sun-drenched groves of the comedies, there are springs smelling of brimstone and poisonous gases, spouting chaos and dark impulses. The poisonous gases cause the tawdry pieces of clothing to fall dramatically while smiles sag on cheeks and grins slushy with booze get cruelly frozen. Now perfidy, lies, hypocrisy, conceit, and stupidity stand out in the same light. What has always grabbed me in Shakespeare’s comedies is this bitterness. No matter whether I played Demetrius, Petruchio, or Sir Toby Belch, my thoughts were always loitering about the suspicion that Master William probably knew these people so well that it was dangerous for him. Perhaps he knew more than he should. We don’t like knowing so much about ourselves. Such a degree of self-knowledge might exceed our endurance.

During the weeks of preparation for *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, I was surprised at the abundance of less-than-enthusiastic—and sometimes forthrightly hostile—essays that had been published on this comedy. There was a wide range of unfavorable opinion: An extremely bad play! Nothing but fiction and diction! Literary concentrate! A big, lively nothing! Only Berowne, a distant spiritual relation of Petruchio and Mercutio, was granted some absolution; he might evolve into Benedict or prefigure the spirit of Prince Hal or even that of the Prince of Denmark. But no one put in a good word for my awkward Don Armado, at least not in the essays I read. That might be the very reason for my becoming so involved in his character. That is what fueled my enthusiasm to take a firm stand for him. One of my professional quirks may have been born of my encounter with Don Armado. The actor—dare I say it?—sometimes functions as a solicitor. The actor solicits the audience’s acceptance of the character. Every absurd figure acts in accordance with some inner order. Each is right in his or her own way, so the actor must take this character’s truth into himself and put faith in it. The actor has no choice but to fight stoutly for the character’s view, even when

it is proved false. To identify with sin is a game of peril. And how often this game has put me into the defendant's dock, into awkward situations difficult to clear up.

At the first reading rehearsal I didn't have the faintest idea how this "dog comedy" would be staged, what my awkward Don Armado would look like, how he would speak, move, love, and suffer. Like it or not, I was about to live the life of this chap, whoever he was. Then, following the usual procedure that is—thank God!—standard practice in the theatre, we put aside essays and began to rehearse. We began to explore this story of love, jealousy, desires, dreams, and tottering people, each defending our own truth. How my gestures or emphases developed and gave birth to my character I cannot clearly recall. My misty recollection of my funny guy of the past is of a thickheaded, shy crank, who is clumsy, cautious, and posing, who exerts himself to avoid stumbling and as a result trips over his own foot. In his mind his actual failures become heroic deeds, and these become the subject of epics he can sing about himself after picking himself up and dusting himself off. Though everybody laughs at him, he becomes me, and I am dead earnest in speaking his every word, his every sentence. Similarly, he takes seriously everything that happens to him or others. On the side, I was always drawing windmills in my script as reminders of some spiritual source under the name and mask of Don Quixote. This probably would not have bothered the Master, since he regularly helped himself to elements from well-known stories and showed no sign of guilty conscience.

As a start, I committed a brave falsification, which might elicit serious objections. Don Armado's choking, jealous letter of "denunciation," which in the text is carried by Dull was in our production delivered by Don Armado. Stammering, stuttering, sniveling, I handed it over to the king. It was crucial that I be the one to report personally the upsetting event, the revolting "porno" scene that I had witnessed: my secret love Jacquenetta fornicating with a guy of low rank. It was at this point, at the very beginning, that everything became confused for my melancholic, gallant gentleman. The lyrical poet, the ordained priest of enthusiasm, the lunatic general of peace goes mad in front of everyone and becomes a fool of love.

That stricken state served as the basis on which to reanimate the figure's body and soul. My clumsy military uniform coat reaching to the ground, my feathered Spanish hat, rusty sword, riding gauntlet with holes in it, fine handkerchief, laces and ribbons, the faded red rose, and slips of paper with love sonnets were all the belongings of the lonely soldier with the soul of a lyric poet. These are the props of a middle-aged man longing to love and be loved, seeking friendship, emotionally still a teenager. He is

a being so lonely, so defenseless, desiring so much to belong to someone and something, that it is easy for him to be hurt, to be driven mad.

Even in this bitter comedy, everything revolves around love. Loud-mouthed bragging, firebrand love letters, frightened evasions, frisky flirtations, jealous spying—all aim at one thing: to conquer the heart of the beloved “she.” As if contemplating my youth, I remember in a muddled way the events and places of the play. The forest where we chased each other, bushes that hid us when we fornicated, a board fence that served to protect me, castle gates that opened creakily and swung shut with a loud bang behind me, raging storms and gales, blasting trumpets and screaming bugles have all infiltrated my private memory. No matter how far in the past those sounds recede, the memory of them can still fluster me. The realm of the imagination created by Shakespeare is closer to living reality than the tangible world. While the important streets, houses, stairs of my youth fade with passing time, something from Don Armado’s world made a permanent impression on me. When Don Armado stepped into my shoes, something determining happened, something that had an impact on my whole life.

The brilliant punchline of the parallel-action plot is definitely the amateur performance of Holofernes’s dreadful play of the Nine Worthies. Presenting theatre within the theatre is always a peculiar experience for



Péter Huszti played Don Adriano de Armado at the Madách Színház in Budapest. Photo courtesy of Péter Huszti.

actors and audience, especially when it includes a mockery of actors' zeal. But in our production, the "staff meeting" in which the performance is planned (Act V, Scene 1) was every bit as enjoyable as the payoff. In that scene, we insolently let our own experiences sneak into the discussion; that is, experiences my fellow actors and I had all had in confrontations with small-minded politicians in charge of culture, dull bank officials, and ministry employees who bore a grudge against the theatre. Then came our pageant, and all hell broke loose at last. The audience screamed with laughter to the point that we could scarcely continue. Even objects played an active part in undermining the Nine Worthies. The folding screens toppled over, swords broke, helmet visors resisted being raised or lowered, curtains sagged, torches ceased burning when light was necessary and shone obstinately when it should have been dark. The riff-raff band, playing completely off key, struck up a tune at an inappropriate moment. And finally all of the stage trappings collapsed, burying all the zealous dilettantes beneath it. On top of the failures in his private life, his disappointments in love, Don Armado was pulled down as an artist too. Desires, dreams, and hopes miscarried. However, the fatal stab was still ahead. No sooner had I risen to my feet again than Costard, who stole my love, challenged me to a duel in the presence of the king and the whole court, fixing the condition that the duel be fought with both parties in their shirts, as befits real gentlemen. Tension filled the room. What a horrible moment for me! In this hard, stunning silence, I pondered whether I had to admit that I was unable to protect my honor, unable to accept the challenge of my opponent, unable to remove my military coat and fight in a shirt, because the dreadful truth was that . . . I had no shirt. There was a sudden burst of laughter both on the stage and in the audience. Then I was stripped of my coat, left standing half naked and defenseless in front of my beloved king, my lost love, and the whole court. Everything went black in front of my eyes. The world ceased to exist. *Finita la commedia!*

At that moment, every single night, as if by the sudden touch of a magic wand, the audience's laughter subsided. For youngsters and elderly people alike, this cruel joke, this awkward, unnecessary humiliation exceeded everybody's tolerance. So the miracle was accomplished. That's enough, thank you.

Shakespeare is most gratifying at times like that, when I succeed in getting close, body and soul, to those sitting in the auditorium. Conversations after the performance showed me that the stories of Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Petruchio, Sir Toby Belch, Oberon, Hector, and Don Armado were not mere fairy tales to them. They must have recognized something from

life and learned something about themselves. Thus Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies can be considered cruel courses in life, which instruct us in getting acquainted with others and with ourselves at the same time.

At the end of each performance of *Love's Labour's Lost*, we came to the front of the stage, piled up our props, the fake jewelry, the lopsided hats, the broken swords, the faded flowers. With sweat smudging the makeup on our faces, we crooned a tune of love, which is to conquer everything. But I scarcely heard the tune, so enchanted was I with watching people who sat like children, their cheeks red from laughing, their eyes filled with tears, stretching out their hands towards us a bit timidly, but hopefully. . . . Hey, Mr. Shakespeare! You teach us the most dreadful truths through your plays. The higher you take us, the greater our fall will be when you bring your dreams and magic to an end. It happens after each comedy, each tragedy, each rehearsal, each performance. Hey, Mr. Shakespeare in front of the altar of Stratford! Take care of us! Pay attention to us!

NOTE

*Péter Huszti, one of Hungary's leading stage and screen actors, has been a member of the Madách Színház theatre company in Budapest since 1966. He wrote this essay especially for this volume.

Love's Labour's Lost

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