

***WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S LAND OF THE DEAD***

*A true and accurate account of the 1599 zombie plague*

by John Heimbuch

**15 PAGE SCRIPT SAMPLE  
+ SYNOPSIS**

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## CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

### The Lord Chamberlain's Men

William Shakespeare (35)	player, playwright of histories and light comedies
Richard Burbage (31)	player, theatre manager, specializing in tragic heroes
Will Kemp (40s)	player, clown, who has since left the company
John Rice (teens)	player apprentice, still playing female roles
Kate Braithwaite (30s)	the tiring house woman, a seamstress and stagehand
John "Sinklo" Sinckler (30s)	hired player, tall, gaunt and mostly silent

### The Queen's Court

Francis Bacon (38)	lawyer, courtier, natural philosopher, writer
Sir Robert Cecil (36)	spymaster, sworn protector of the Queen
Queen Elizabeth Tudor (65)	Queen of Great Britain, France, and Ireland
Doctor John Dee (71)	court astrologer and metaphysical philosopher
Soldier 1	a recruiting officer for the Irish wars
Soldier 2	a soldier of the Queen's guard

Additional Players/Soldiers/Afflicted as needed

## TIME AND PLACE

Summer 1599. Southwark, England. After the inaugural performance of Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*, in the tiring house of the newly-built Globe Playhouse.

## PLAY SYNOPSIS

*9 males, 2 females, various non-speaking roles; unit set; runtime approx. 90 minutes*

London, 1599. After the Globe's inaugural performance of *Henry V*, Shakespeare fends off an embittered Will Kemp, furious about Falstaff's removal, and Francis Bacon, who has arrived with an idea to pitch. But when the company's costumer is bitten by a plague-ridden madman and the Queen and her men arrive seeking safety, life in the playhouse takes a turn for the worse. As the affliction spreads destruction through London, the Globe is placed in quarantine and the survivors within must fight for their lives. Can they escape? Is there a cure? Is friendship more important than art? And after being assaulted by theatrical advice and bloodthirsty hordes, who can say which is worse? *William Shakespeare's Land of the Dead* is both a comedic homage to zombie films and a carefully researched drama about Shakespeare and his authorship.

ACT I  
*Dusk*

*(Backstage of the Globe playhouse – a candlelit changing room with tables, benches, chairs and baskets for storage. Entrances include a door leading outside, steps to the balcony, and an entrance to the playhouse stage. Littered around the backstage are the costumes, props and weapons of Shakespeare's Henry the Fifth, except any items used during Act Five, which is currently being performed. KEMP enters from the street, plainly dressed with morris bells upon his legs. He listens to Henry the Fifth with a sense of amused irony. KATE enters carrying props and costumes. She hears KEMP, but doesn't look up.)*

KATE

Hallo, noisemaker! I can hear those bells stage left. And if it's young Master Rice, I'll thank you not to clatter the properties when you've an entrance to make.

KEMP

Never pass a chance to give a good scold, do you my Kate?

KATE

Will Kemp!

KEMP

Ah-haha! She lives, does she? My Katherine-Katherine-Kate. I wondered if the Burbages would be kind enough to unscrew you from your sticking place when they tore down that decrepit Shoreditch pit they called the Theatre. But I see my little fixture has already been installed in the Globe.

KATE

What are you doing here? They'll be in the tiring house as soon as the play ends, and I doubt Master Shakespeare would be glad to see you. Today of all days.

KEMP

Shakerags can spit for all it's worth. I saw the broadsheets all through London – Shakespeare's History of Henry the Fifth to open the Globe – so when I saw the banner raised today, I thought I'd see what he's done with my play now that Falstaff's not in it! And perchance give the good people a taste of what's missing.

KATE

Kemp, don't tell me you've come for a jig. Oh, God's wounds, you have.

KEMP

I confess 'twill be a touch jig-like. Behold in me the Nine Days Wonder!

KATE

Nine Days Wonder, what foolishness is that?

KEMP

Nay, ask not, but listen and be amazed!

KATE

You aren't going out there.

KEMP

You can be certain I am. At the end of part two did I not say Falstaff would return, by the playwright's own words? The Chamberlain's Men may be contentedly false, but I'll not let them make a liar of Kemp.

KATE

Will! This is no longer your Company and these not your roles! Shakespeare's already killed Falstaff off, what would he say if you barge onstage to grace his new Globe with your unwelcome legs?

KEMP

Don't think you'll thwart me my sweet Kate-o-nine tails. These unwelcome legs fought fraught Shoreditch streets to trod the boards - as all London talks of Irish wars and Spanish fleets. Even now I did yet 'scape a brawl. Near Surgeon's Hall I passed the rough remnant of an old tavern fight where some crazed jack-o-bedlam with blood-streaming lip and limbs all a-thrashing fell on me in fervor, but these true legs (which you would disparage) did bestow him such a kick that he collapsed on the street, whilst I, unscathed, did hie myself here to sit in a tavern over a middling cup of sack till that murderous William's two hours traffic had passed.

*(Suddenly a loud explosion is heard, some distance away.)*

KATE

Now that's quite a sound!

KEMP

Was it not from the play?

KATE

No. Perhaps it was some regimental cannonry. There's a drill field nearby.

KEMP

Oh, there's an idea - let's build a playhouse in a marshy Southwark drill field. How very like Burbage. I bet the land was cheap. Who crosses the river to take in a play?

KATE

Well, I pray it desists.

KEMP

Pray a bit harder, else you may have to go tell the regiment that they disrupt a new play by Will Shakespeare. And failing that, bring it straight to the Queen.

KATE

I may do, if she persists to wage such noisome wars.

*(‘Onstage’ the play draws to a close, followed by a burst of applause and stamping. As the music begins, KEMP straightens his clothing.)*

KEMP

Hark the applause!

KATE

Kemp, I say don't!

KEMP

Alas dear Kate, my sweet-tongued shrew, these bells give me deafness to all but my cue - so till after my entrance I bid thee adieu!

*(KEMP greets the Lord Chamberlain's Men as they enter from the stage, including BURBAGE, the capable manager of the Chamberlain's Men (dressed as Hal); RICE, an apprentice player in his early teens (dressed as Katharine), and SINKLO. Throughout the following, the Players remove their costumes and get dressed, maybe ad-libbing about the show, the audience, and where to drink. Finally, SHAKESPEARE (dressed as Burgundy/Chorus) enters last.)*

KEMP

My most notable Shakerags!

*(KEMP slides past SHAKESPEARE and heads onstage, where he begins to deliver his Nine Days Wonder speech.)*

SHAKESPEARE

Kemp!

BURBAGE

Shakespeare, leave him be.

SHAKESPEARE

Damn it, Burbage, what is he doing here?

KATE

He told me he was here to do a jig of sorts.

SHAKESPEARE

A jig!

BURBAGE

Kate.

SHAKESPEARE

And you didn't stop him?

KATE

Aye, there's a thought –stop Master Kemp once he's made up his mind. Stop him yourself if it matters to you. Master Sinkler, how many times must I ask you hired men not to throw your shirts on the floor?

BURBAGE

Will, I made it quite clear that Kemp not do a jig. A speech, nothing more.

SHAKESPEARE

You knew of this? And still you'd allow him to mar our inaugural show in the Globe, after what he's done?

BURBAGE

Oh please, Will, enough. We all know the cause. Kemp caught me in the Mermaid and asked to promote some wonder of his.

SHAKESPEARE

What wonder is this?

BURBAGE

Some dance or other, I saw no harm.

RICE

Is this Will Kemp the clown?

KATE

The same, Master John. Now be off with your wig.

RICE

I saw him play Falstaff and Bottom the Weaver. I thought he was funny.

SHAKESPEARE

Gather some years and you'll learn to feel different.

BURBAGE

Beware of your bite, William, the boy means no harm.

SHAKESPEARE

I needn't say more. Burbage can tell you just how comic Kemp is.

BURBAGE

Will.

KATE

They both have their gifts, no mistake, little John – but let this be proof, two strong Wills can never work well together.

SHAKESPEARE

It wouldn't be an issue if the damned prancing fool had just kept to the script. And when I kindly insisted that he stick to the page, he raised such a stink we had to cancel three shows!

BURBAGE

Look, Will. I barred him from playing, but I don't see the harm in promoting his work.

SHAKESPEARE

No? He's playing for Alleyn now! Imagine he discovered our prompt script, and brought it to Ned with Falstaff stuck back in it. What harm it would be if Ned Alleyn played your King Henry.

BURBAGE

Oh.

RICE

Could he do that?

SHAKESPEARE

Don't think he wouldn't.

KATE

He could but he won't.

SHAKESPEARE

You don't know Kemp as I do, my Kate.

KATE

It's still well enough. He may not be nice, but that don't mean he's a liar.

SHAKESPEARE

See if he's not, Mistress Kate, and I will eat my words.

KATE

You certainly chew them enough.

BURBAGE

Will, there's nothing to gain by holding a grudge. We've both known Kemp since we had no beard – I think it only meet that we buy him a drink. All difference aside, he is still a friend.

*(KEMP returns, dancing his way in from the stage.)*

KEMP

Aye, that'll give them a taste! And so my jig is up. Hey nonny good friends – some months hence and another bank of the Thames sees you all well met! A fine playhouse you've built. Sinklo, still hale as ever. Is that Condell? Heminges – how's the wife? Hey, Burbage, my thanks – there's many now eager to see the Morris itself.

BURBAGE

Indeed, Kemp. I hope you are well.

KEMP

Oh, well enough. I'm playing with Ned again – courteous of him to have me back after all these years. Ah, you remember dear Shakes, how we played them back when Marlowe still held a pen? Why quiet, my glum little Shakestaff? I warn you now, silence is not so great a defense as you might suppose.

SHAKESPEARE

It's good to see you again, Kemp.

KEMP

Oh-ho, is that so, dear William the Second? And the same to you, if you say so. Now friends, let's drink your success in taking the Globe, may it please your creditors as much as it please you!

*(The players cheer.)*

BURBAGE

Our creditors have every reason to be happy tonight!

KEMP

Not after we find the tavern, they won't. They're coming to get you Burbage!

BURBAGE

Peace Kemp! I'll buy you that drink. To your great Morris and our new playhouse crowned by the reign of fierce Henry! Tonight at the Mermaid, the shareholders buy!

*(The players cheer.)*

KEMP

Oh! Remind me, dear Shakes, after a draught, to bend your ear with an idea for a play.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh no, I fear I must beg off.

KEMP

Not in the least! You wrote this triumph, lacking though it may be in one noble knight.

SHAKESPEARE

Noble's hardly the word for what you had done! Jigging through the play, speaking to the audience, and running free with your words! No, Kemp. Falstaff died for thy sins, long before I scratched out his name. It could not be helped.

KEMP

But could you not at least show his death?

SHAKESPEARE

Forget not I had! A great hero's death on Bosworth Field. But like a base coward thou wouldst not stay dead, but rose resurrected, to say thou dissembled.

KEMP

Oh, and was there not a laugh? The best ever heard! Laughed so hard that you begged me to keep it and then penned it in. Did you not pen it in?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes.

KEMP

Then scold not me! Oh how they roared to hear it played! We had them that day, and so they returned for part two! And so we said it would be with Hal Five. Good fights, strong princes, and Falstaff for laughs. And where was the truth in that? No Falstaff today! The audience comes, when they do, to see an actor play a role. Not for the words but for the clowning, jesting, speaking, acting, singing, jigging, fighting best of us. The words in the play are but fine trimmings on our effort.

SHAKESPEARE

Is that so?

KEMP

Aye, by my tongue, so it is!

SHAKESPEARE

Then I must thank you, Kemp, for telling me so. In my folly I thought that some might have come to hear a story, but now I see: they're here for thee, Kemp, and any praise that I receive is a mere fool's fancy.

KEMP

At least now you know. You should be grateful to me, Shakerags, for who else could make thy Dogberry, Falstaff, and Bottom ring true, but one Cavaliero Kemp, - who with wit and jig did send thy words to the heights of Olympus!

SHAKESPEARE

May God grace thee for it, Kemp, for I know I cannot. But what of Mistress Katherine?

KATE

Nay, bring me not in this.

KEMP

Yes, do Shakes, make sense.

SHAKESPEARE

How couldst thou play thy roles without her pins? 'Twas she made Bottom into a perfect ass and padded Falstaff's glutton's belly with special hose. She sewed thy buttons, polished thy bells, and oft did make a motley fool of thee. So tell me, dear Kemp, if you will, how is it a player may thrive without stage, nor words, nor clothes of any kind?

KEMP

If he be skilled enough a man can earn his bread by dance alone. Hence the Nine Days Wonder!

SHAKESPEARE

What wonder is this?

KEMP

To dance a Morris from London to Norwich!

SHAKESPEARE

London to Norwich in nine days? That's madness.

KEMP

Well, they aren't nine days in a row! Or how could I savor my fame in each town on the way?

SHAKESPEARE

A fine fool's idea.

KEMP

No wonder. It's yours.

SHAKESPEARE

Mine?

KEMP

Yes! Do you not recall that you bid me to dance if I wouldn't play as you bade? Well, at first I gnashed my teeth over your suggestion, but then Sinklo called it a fine idea, and I thought here's my final chance to turn your words to my gain. So you see: to play a fool is not to be a fool. Nine Days dancing will bring more than a year in the Chamberlain's Men!

SHAKESPEARE

Then go dance thy Nine Men's Morris, I wish thee the best.

KEMP

Now that's a first - William Shakespeare wishes Will Kemp the best! There's a fine one. I'll best you! I'll best the great lot of you over a good pot of ale! A-ha! To the tavern with all!

*(KEMP and the players leave. BURBAGE hangs back with SHAKESPEARE, RICE, and KATE.)*

BURBAGE

Will you not bury your hatchet?

SHAKESPEARE

I would bury it in him. But by all means, go in good faith. Drink with him a pot of ale, and say what thou wilt of me. I'm sure there's much to say.

BURBAGE

You're sure you won't join us?

SHAKESPEARE

No. I am in pain.

BURBAGE

John?

RICE

By and by, once I'm unmade.

BURBAGE

Indeed, at the tavern it's wise to be less a maid than you now seem. Kate?

KATE

Nay Richard, my only, the banner will not bring itself in. But with my blessing, you may give this to Kemp.

*(KATE kisses BURBAGE. SHAKESPEARE looks away.)*

BURBAGE

I'd rather keep it myself, lest the intent be lost in the conveyance.

KATE

As you please.

BURBAGE

It would please me to please you.

KATE

Aye, 'tis well known – go on, your fellows await.

BURBAGE

So they do. Good night to you all!

*(BURBAGE exits to the street.)*

SHAKESPEARE

Well Master Rice, you've played your first role.

RICE

I'm sorry if I offended, sir.

SHAKESPEARE

No, John – yours is not the apology I seek. Did you enjoy playing Katherine?

RICE

I enjoyed speaking your words.

SHAKESPEARE

We'll see if you still feel the same once you've said a few more of them. How came you here?

RICE

By the river.

SHAKESPEARE

I meant, to your apprenticeship.

RICE

And as I said, by the river. My father's a boatman, and saw the Globe being built. When the Queen began to conscript against the Irish Rebellion, he said: "If you must serve the crown by playing a soldier, I'd rather it was in the playhouse than the field." Watermen's sons are oft pressed to service.

SHAKESPEARE

You ever pilot a bark?

RICE

Wouldn't be a boatman's boy if I hadn't. Sir, how came you to acting?

SHAKESPEARE

My father's a glover. He sat in the guildhall at Stratford where the traveling players performed till some strife over sympathies encouraged him to sign me to Ned Alleyn's company.

KATE

His father's a catholic.

SHAKESPEARE

Kate!

KATE

Is he not?

SHAKESPEARE

Leave it be.

RICE

And were you there with Will Kemp?

SHAKESPEARE

Long ago. We were once good friends.

KATE

Young master John, take this to heart: No actor of skill, no matter how great, is ever the better to fight with a playwright.

RICE

Why?

KATE

Because playwrights fight dirty. Any thing that you say may be put on the stage to paint a sad mockery of you.

RICE

But you've not done this of Kemp?

KATE

Hasn't he, now? I'm sure some work of betrayal has even this moment been set to the page. Do tell us, Will - what is your next play?

SHAKESPEARE

It's not about Kemp.

KATE

So it's a betrayal, is it?

SHAKESPEARE

Perhaps. Oh, now you'll laugh.

KATE

Come now, the title!

SHAKESPEARE

The Tragedy of Julius Caesar.

KATE

A ha! What did I say – a betrayal! And what a betrayal it is.

SHAKESPEARE

I knew you would laugh.

KATE

Oh Will, how you worry. We all know you're brilliant. See how the hairline withdraws to make room for the brain!

RICE

Master Shakespeare, can all men be so found in their art?

SHAKESPEARE

Art is an echo of the person who made it. But you need an astute ear indeed to locate its source. If a man wished know me, he'd be much better served to buy me a pint.

RICE

And how will they know you a hundred years hence?

SHAKESPEARE

If my work is still known a hundred years hence, I'll buy you that pint.

RICE

Don't think they'll endure?

SHAKESPEARE

Plays are nothing but a product of their times, likely to wane with the fashion of the day. No, Master Rice, if anything it is by the strength of the youth that our art shall survive. So be attentive and studious, and the length of your days shall be the legacy of mine.

RICE

With any luck, I'll be out of this dress before those days end.

SHAKESPEARE

Ha!

KATE

Don't you encourage him.

SHAKESPEARE

No no, of course. You see, Master John, for all my dark sonnets, Kate knows me too well.

KATE

I know Burbage better. They may be your words, but he brings them to life.

SHAKESPEARE

Good thing he does, my wife wouldn't approve.

KATE

Do you think that his does?

SHAKESPEARE

I try not to wonder. Have you ever told him?

KATE

Oh, zounds, Will. What's past is past.

SHAKESPEARE

He's still my best friend.

KATE

And need I remind you that you called it off? There's nothing to tell. He's happy not knowing and I'm glad he doesn't. Telling him now would only spell trouble. You're both married men -- with daughters, I might add. I'm sorry --

SHAKESPEARE

Please don't. Will you never wed?

KATE

Be glad that I don't. Then where would you be? You lot can't even pick up your costumes, let alone unlace a corset.

RICE

Speaking of, Mistress Kate --

KATE

Now for that you must wait, Master Rice.

*(There is a knock on the exterior door.)*

SHAKESPEARE

If that's some well-wisher, I've gone out.

KATE

Yes, yes.

*(KATE opens the door to Francis BACON. He is a well-dressed lawyer in his late 30s, with a stately beard and an air of conscious superiority.)*

KATE

Good evening, sir.

BACON

Madam, if Master Shakespeare is within tell him that Francis Bacon would share a word.

KATE

Alas, Master Bacon, Shakespeare has gone for the night.

SHAKESPEARE

Francis Bacon, you say?

KATE

Aye, but 'tis pointless for me to tell him you've gone when you shout his name so!

*(SHAKESPEARE goes to the door, greeting BACON.)*

SHAKESPEARE

Master Bacon, a pleasure to see you outside the Queen's court.

BACON

Master Shakespeare, do you always tell your servants to turn away gentlemen of breeding?

SHAKESPEARE

No, of course. Thank you, Kate.

*(KATE returns to her work.)*

SHAKESPEARE

Master Bacon, an honor. I must thank you again for the gift of your essays last winter at Richmond. Such well-formed thoughts, so concisely put.

BACON

Yes.

*(An awkward beat)*

SHAKESPEARE

And, uh, what brings you to visit the Lord Chamberlain's Men?

BACON

Why, to see the new Globe, of course! 'tis a wonderful building with a good view of the river – although the magic does wear off somewhat backstage.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh. Our apprentice, John Rice. Francis Bacon.

*(RICE curtseys then bows.)*

RICE

Did you enjoy Henry the Fifth, sir?

BACON

You know, the problem with a new playhouse is that they're always more entertaining than the plays they contain. Oh this one was decent enough. Cleverness, fighting. Burbage was good. Though I couldn't help but notice that Jack Falstaff was missing.

SHAKESPEARE

The problems with Falstaff were out of my hands.

BACON

A shame. May we speak in private?

KATE

John, go upstairs.

RICE

I would prefer to go to the tavern.

Young man, I must first sweep the stage, bolt the doors and bring down the banner.

RICE

But -

KATE

– But me no buts. The whole riverside needn't think we're doing a show when we aren't. Your corset shall wait. Upstairs, now.

**END OF SAMPLE**