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The Complete History of Theatre (abridged) (One-Act Version)

By

MATT THOMPSON

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MATT THOMPSON

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(THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF THEATRE [ABRIDGED]
[ONE-ACT VERSION])

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The Complete History of Theatre (abridged) (One-Act Version)
premiered at the San Diego Fringe Festival on July 27, 2017.

Cast:

STAN Patrick Duffy
BILL..... Steve Leffler
SARAH Rebecca Church
ENSEMBLE Lauren Presky

Production Staff:

Director Matt Thompson
Set and Prop Designer..... William Rickman
Costumer Delilah Sanderville
Sound Designer Matt Warburton
Lighting Designer Bill Ulrich

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CHARACTERS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (Bill): A goofball who has penned the world's most famous plays. Fun-loving and outgoing, Bill seems to act more like a child than the genius who penned some of the world's greatest works of theatrical art.

CONSTANTINE STANISLAVSKY (Stan): The Russian scholar. Bill's great friend. He attempts to wrangle Bill's childish attitude and Sarah's ego in order to continue the play.

SARAH BERNHARDT (Sarah): The greatest actress the stage has ever known, for the stage can barely contain her talent, her love for applause and her ego.

ENSEMBLE MEMBER: Plays Stage Manager / House Manager / Playwright / Producer / Sound Designer / Light Designer / Set Designer / Costume Designer / Director / Stage Hand.

NOTE: The piece may be expanded up to 13 actors. Dividing the ensemble roles does not affect the flow of the show, but it's a fun challenge for one actor to play all of them. Feel free to embellish the ensemble characters as the production sees fit. The ensemble and gender-neutral audience interactions have been written as male, but feel free to change pronouns as necessary.

PROP LIST

Clipboard
Note cards
Script in a red binder
Fake cellphone
A life-sized stuffed dummy
Flashlight
Tape measure
Hammer
Two towels
Fake arrow that is bent
Pillow
A simple silver bell
Fake straight razor
Paint brush
Fake sausage
Pipe
Monocle or eye glasses
Royal pen
Royal pad of paper
Fake human skull
Fake gladiator sword
Newspaper
Sweep broom

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

This piece is quick in tone and pace, and it is meant to be funny and full of improvisation. Don't let the audience get ahead of the curve on this one. Obviously the entire history of theatre is not presented here, as I have chosen to highlight some of the best and brightest moments of theatrical history. Keep it snappy, keep it light and, above all, have fun with it! Special thanks to Mac Wellman and La Mama Theatre Umbria.

The lines that are scripted are essential to keep the piece moving, but the moments of audience interaction are paramount to the structure of the play. Actors should feel free to riff with the audience members.

Another note about costumes, the original production had the characters in full costumes with the exception of tennis shoes. This allowed the audience to realize the free-spirited feeling of the piece while also ensuring that the actors were on stable footing throughout each performance. As a reminder, this play works best when the audience acts like another character.

With regards to the ensemble member that announces, "abridged," past productions have been able to get the audience to acknowledge and pronounce the "abridged" lines just by gesturing to the crowd beginning halfway through the piece. There is flexibility with this element. With that said, the production must include the three differing endings, meaning all three must be rehearsed so that the audience is once again fully involved. It's a massive bit of fun and keeps the cast on their toes!

A prop list is included at the back of the playbook.

The Complete History of Theatre (abridged) (One-Act Version)

ACT I

(Before the play starts, STAN, BILL and SARAH are in the house in full costume, greeting the audience, improvising with them, helping them to their seats, etc. ... The stage is littered with an assortment of theatrical items that you would generally find backstage, including various costumes, props and used set pieces. There are two non-matching chairs and an old costume rack somewhere onstage. A few bookshelves filled with classic plays and assorted props littering the shelves. The show works best when most of the props and costumes used throughout the show are already onstage. It is also good to have a few theatre boxes with a shelf or two inside of them for props.

At about five minutes to curtain, the STAGE MANAGER, full of gruff, crosses the stage carrying a clipboard.)

STAGE MANAGER. Five minutes! Five minutes to places!

REST OF THE CAST. Thank you, five!

(The STAGE MANAGER exits. The rest of the cast continues to improvise. At show time, the STAGE MANAGER reappears and crosses the stage again.)

STAGE MANAGER. Places! Places for the top of the show, please! Places!

REST OF THE CAST. Thank you, places.

(The cast exits the house and goes backstage. The STAGE MANAGER exits and re-enters as the HOUSE MANAGER, who jumps up on the stage to make the curtain speech. He is warm and inviting, a stark contrast to the abruptness of the STAGE MANAGER. He may speak with a Midwestern accent.)

HOUSE MANAGER. Good evening, everyone. *(Pulls out a card and reads directly from it, very poorly.)* Hi, everybody, my name is insert name here. And we'd like to welcome you to the name of the theatre and our production of insert production here! *(Looking up.)* Enjoy the show, and most importantly, whatever you do ... don't fall asleep.

(Dramatic music plays. The lights rise as STAN, BILL and SARAH enter and directly address the audience.)

ALL. Welcome!

SARAH. To the most fantastic evening you will ever encounter!

BILL. Tonight, we are preping to present to you—

STAN *(to BILL)*. Preparing, preparing is the word, Bill. Preparing.

BILL. Yes, uh ... We are preparing to present to you—

ALL. *The Complete History of Theatre!*

ENSEMBLE. *Abridged!*

BILL. As told by the talented actress, Sarah Bernhardt.

SARAH. The prudent scholar, Constantine Stanislavsky.

STAN. And the world's most famous playwright, the Bard of Avon, the original upstart crow, William Shakespeare.

BILL. Hang on a second! Stop.

(They drop character a little.)

BILL. Why does she get top billing?

SARAH. Marketing, honey! I'm a star.

BILL. Yes, but it's pretty obvious that I'm the most famous of them all. I mean, when someone speaks of the theatre, they automatically think of my name ... William Shakespeare! *(To the audience.)* Am I correct or what?

(Wait a moment for audience reaction.)

STAN. We ... Uh ... Bill, we haven't done that bit yet.

BILL. What bit?

STAN. Breaking the fourth wall.

BILL. The what?

STAN. The fourth wall.

SARAH. Must we explain everything?

STAN. You see, when Henrik Ibsen, the father of modern realism, first wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879, he was working in a proscenium theatre that—

BILL. This is ridiculous. Everyone knows who I am.

(BILL goes into the audience and finds an audience member to speak to.)

SARAH. Bill, what are you doing?

BILL. Proving a point!

BILL *(very professionally, moving through his bio quickly)*. Hello, sir. My name is William Shakespeare, but my friends just call me Bill, son of an alderman and a successful glover, originally from Snitterfield. I've been called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon." My theatrical productions have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any

other playwright in human history. My extensive use of the reconstruction of the English language helped shape grammar. (*Beat as he looks at the audience member. Flippantly.*) So, who are you?

(*Audience member responds. BILL may improvise with the audience member a little if he likes.*)

BILL (*cont'd*). OK [AUDIENCE MEMBER NAME], I just have one question for you—please name one play, any play by myself, William Shakespeare.

(*The audience member names a play.*)

BILL (*cont'd*). So, [AUDIENCE MEMBER NAME], thank you very much. Round of applause for our audience member here.

(*The audience applauds.*)

BILL (*cont'd*). You see everyone knows who I am and so I believe that I should be named first in the billing.

STAN. Regardless, Bill! I say, it's utterly impossible that you wrote all of those plays by yourself.

SARAH. Guys, we have people out there who paid a lot of money ...

(*They all look out into the audience.*)

SARAH (*cont'd*). OK, *some* money to see a fully staged play.

BILL (*pointing to an elderly audience member*). This guy looks like he got comped.

SARAH. I'm gonna comp you both in the head if we don't get going here!

STAN. So Bill, how could you write about places you've never been?

SARAH. Stan has a point. Some of your most famous characters are from the four points of the globe.

STAN. Your Benedick and Beatrice trounce around Messina in Italy.

BILL. You two are making much ado about nothing.

STAN. *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* are both set in Rome.

BILL. I've heard they've got great cannoli.

SARAH. What about the bloodiest play you've ever composed, *Titus Andronicus*?

BILL. I was feeling moody.

SARAH. Bill, you've never set foot in Verona, the home of *Romeo and Juliet*, the world's greatest romance?

BILL. Teenagers with hormones!

STAN. Yet your play *Timon of Athens* was set in Athens?

BILL. Did I write that?

SARAH. Never been to the famous French cities of Roussillon, Marseille or Paris!

BILL. I don't know, but all's well that ends well.

STAN. As you like it, and you've even been to the forest of Arden?

BILL. Might have had a picnic there once.

SARAH. Never heard the music *Measure for Measure* in Vienna?

BILL. I'm tone deaf.

STAN. Climbed the pyramids of Egypt for *Antony and Cleopatra*?

BILL. Had the kids that weekend.

SARAH. Your *Troilus and Cressida* went to Turkey.

BILL. I'm a vegetarian.

STAN. Pericles visited Lebanon, Antioch, Tharsus, Pentapolis, Mytilene—

BILL. Must have forgot my passport.

STAN. Even your magnum opus, the play that has been produced more times than any other on the planet, *Hamlet*, is set in the castle of Elsinore. And you've never even set one foot in bloody Denmark?!

BILL. I can't ride a bicycle, and they do have a lot of bicycles and—

STAN. So that's a no!

BILL. Fine! Fine! I've never been to any of those countries.

STAN. And I'll bet anyone in this room can write a play about something that they've read about!

BILL. Come on, no one can just write a play. It's a skill, a craft, it's ... art.

STAN. True art comes from the interpretation of the character.

BILL. But I'm still the most famous!

STAN. You have, by no doubt, the most inflated ego!

BILL. Me, what about your pedantic rhetoric? Going on and on like an intellectual!

STAN. I am an intellectual!

BILL. Intellectual at being dumb.

SARAH. Gentlemen, stop it.

STAN. Just because your plays have lasted for over four hundred years—

BILL. You can't blame that on me! Heminges and Condell took all of my work and put it in a folio!

SARAH. I'm going to put both of you in a folio if you don't stop arguing!

PLAYWRIGHT (*from the audience in a loud whisper*). Will you keep going!

(Beat.)

BILL. Did you say something?

STAN. It wasn't me.

PLAYWRIGHT. Keep going!

BILL. Who's that?

(SARAH notices the PLAYWRIGHT in the audience.)

SARAH. I think it's the playwright.

STAN. How do you know?

SARAH. Because he's crossing towards the stage right now.

(PLAYWRIGHT has been sitting in the audience and starts to make his way up to the stage. Everyone scrambles. The PLAYWRIGHT enters, looking exceptionally scholarly in a Houndstooth jacket, carrying a pipe and a red folder that contains the script. He wears an elegant hat with feathers in it.)

PLAYWRIGHT. All right, what in the name of Eugene O'Neil's underpants is going on up here?

(All three of them begin to explain at once. After a moment, PLAYWRIGHT cuts them off.)

PLAYWRIGHT *(cont'd)*. For the love of Richard Burbage's codpiece, will all of you wait a minute! You three are turning this play into a *Comedy of Errors*, blabbering on about art and language and you haven't spoken a word about the complete history of theatre!

ALL. Abridged.

PLAYWRIGHT. I suggest that you get this production moving or else we are going to get what none of us wants—a bad review! *(Gesturing to the audience.)* Time is of the essence. *(Indicating an AUDIENCE MEMBER.)* That man there is starting to fall asleep, so wake him up.

BILL. How?

SARAH. With our incredible talent, of course!

PLAYWRIGHT. She's correct. Now, let's keep this show moving unless you want to be written off into literary obscurity! *(Takes a puff of the pipe and exits backstage in a huff.)*

(Quick dramatic music. All three do a choreographed dramatic flurry as quick-paced music plays underneath the action.)

STAN. We three take you back in time to the days of ancient literature!

BILL. Figs and olive oil!

STAN. The Pantheon!

SARAH. The Olympics!

STAN. The House of Atreus!

BILL. Yummy cheese made from goats!

STAN. We take you back ...

ALL. To ancient Greece!

(Greek music plays. BILL and STAN quick change into togas and laurels, and appropriate wigs. BILL is dressed as Jocasta. SARAH holds up her costume.)

STAN. The ancient Greeks celebrated theatre by having drama festivals dedicated to the gods, Zeus and Dionysis.

(STAN and BILL silently argue off to the side as they change into their togas and wigs. SARAH is handed a laurel that looks more like a beautiful tiara and puts it on her head.)

SARAH. Perhaps the most famous of Greek tragedies was the tale of the poor King Oedipus. Mr. Stanislavky will be playing Oedipus. And Bill will be playing Jocasta, his queen.

(BILL enters in drag.)

BILL. What type of character is she?

STAN. She's a very demanding and angry housewife.

SARAH. Oedipus' sense of hubris, or what is called excessive pride, blinds him from the truth. And here we start our scene.

(Music.)

BILL/JOCASTA *(quickly getting into character)*. Eddie, no dessert till you finish your Spanokopita! What's wrong? You hardly touched your dinner of fried goat tongue and carp hearts.

STAN/OEDIPUS *(very serious)*. I've just been trying to end this plague of Apollo that's been ravaging the city of Thebes. I can't seem to figure it out! This darn plague; I hate it so much. It's just been—

BILL/JOCASTA. Plaguing you?

STAN/OEDIPUS. Yes. I ... I am enduring an incredible amount of stress from what I have been hearing around the city.

BILL/JOCASTA. It's like my first husband Laius used to say, "More money, more problems."

STAN/OEDIPUS. And speaking of your first husband, where was it he was murdered?

BILL/JOCASTA. I told you he was killed on the Thebes-Athens interchange. Why are you so interested in this?

STAN/OEDIPUS. I'm not sure—Perhaps the blind prophet Tiresias will show me the future?

BILL/JOCASTA. Yeah, he knows all kinds of stuff, about everything. We call him a Greekapedia. He can get you a deal on designer togas, too.

STAN/OEDIPUS. But isn't he supposed to be crazy?

BILL/JOCASTA. Togas at those prices? Honey, he's not crazy—he's nuts.

(Beat.)

STAN. Bill, that's your cue.

BILL *(blurting out)*. Oh, yeah. Uh. "Beware the idea of March!"

STAN. Ides! Ides of March!

BILL. What's an ide?

SARAH. This is exhausting. Where's my understudy?

STAN *(to BILL)*. Just keep going!

BILL. "All the globe's a stage."

SARAH *(to BILL)*. Will you stop misquoting yourself!

STAN. Bill, do you have any idea what you are saying half the time?!

(The DRAMATURG enters, looking exceptionally scholarly and disheveled.)

BILL. Who are you?

DRAMATURG. The dramaturg.

BILL *(pulling out a cellphone)*. Siri, what's a dramaturd?

(We hear a "Siri" beep.)

SIRI VO. A dramaturd is a production of a play where you leave the theatre and wish you had two or more hours of your life back.

DRAMATURG. I'm a dramturg, not a dramaturd! I'm a professional that deals with research and development of plays.

STAN. Let's keep acting.

SARAH *(to STAN)*. I wasn't aware that you had started.