

I AM SHAKESPEARE

by Mark Rylance

Reviewer: John Gill

I am Shakespeare. Without the customary "smart quotes" offered by default in later word processor updates of Microsoft Word software, the overnight reviewer and critic needs to master some effrontery to start a text with the three words: "I am Shakespeare". What's in such a name? The great humanitarian, Mark Rylance, actor and writer behind the play performed last weekend in Chichester, does not use his real name. The name he was born with, which is best forgotten, had already been registered with his actor's union. How did he look when he fixed upon that surname? Was it chosen as a wry acknowledgement of the great Bard, or that group of them, that he loves so well? Was it another "wry lance" contained in a surname, like the broken spear of the Bulbeck crest that once graced the masthead of The de Vere Society? Now discredited?

If it was, Mark Rylance has kept faith with each claimant, the one or the many, who, together or apart, now blent in the popular imagination, make up the greatest writer of all time who could laugh so heartily in the face of disaster, and make such exquisite fun of the beautiful foibles that make us so quintessentially human. Frank Charlton, the nerd and the hero of Mark Rylance's play, though laughed at without mercy, from beginning to end by author and audience alike, is by the end, a hero of the normal diminutive but extraordinary Shakespearian proportions. It will be difficult to imagine such informed, expert and discriminating craftsmanship; where the ludicrous can be so seamlessly patched with the serious, without acknowledging that the writer and thinker behind this comedy masterpiece must have had longest apprenticeship in the theatre and an open-minded relationship with "The Plays".

Perhaps a definition of the word "nerd" would include the idea that it describes one who has planned for all eventualities; and in doing so has lost touch with reality. Frank Charlton, the hero of the play arrives, obviously late, in his lightless garage; his buffoon cycling helmet built like a baboon's backside with a safety flashing lamp still on and attached to it. He is wearing a thin plastic mac. Frank is one of the arcane fraternity. When it rains the nerds unroll the throwaway macintoshes, and wear them marked with folds, unaware that most of the population would rather be drenched than walk, even in the dark, under the protection of such a garment; for under the street lamps they shine. A nerd set up my computer "spell-checker". It underlines, in red, the word "macintoshes" (there it has done it again). I right-click and it suggests capitalising the word to "Macintosh", a little grudging respect perhaps from the nerd's nerd, Bill Gates to Steve Jobs. If you click Tools/Options you can change from red underline to any colour you like.

The theatre programme, monumental itself, provides Wikipedia-like links for every person taking part to demonstrate that this work is a very serious piece of business. The hypnotic roll call of every play that every actor and dialect coach has been involved in for the last fifty years, must be persevered with. The list is enormous for each contributor, so much so that few will study it in depth. To prevent this natural inclination MR (Mark Rylance) has enlivened the asperity of the lists with the sport of a two-part competition: "Find the false statement hidden within each of the seven actor's biographies." To unravel such a mystery, one would need to be more than numerate, and at least in possession of an MA in "media studies". It is a pity that such a useful qualification has been so recently derided within education circles; for here the recently elevated academic could shine. This search for answers, in themselves trivial, is perhaps meant to be seen as a metaphor for the subject of the play. Such playfulness is in the print and on the page. Stuck inside the programme, like a "bad Quarto" in the most ungainly way is an enormous mimeographed (as they used to say) document that provides the meat of "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt"; a fine enlargement of Henry Peacham's enigmatic hand-behind-the-curtain engraving, a double page spread of all the actors which form the second part of the competition ("link the correct head with the correct body") and very informative and small text biographies of the five most notorious claimants; the most important of whom was the husband of "Anne Hathway"; or was it "Anna Whateley"? By such arguments, so skilfully inveigled, anyone with an open mind can see that no play of Shakespeare, in

fact no play, ever came upon the stage without work, work, work and tireless devotion, much revision, and a long and exacting theatrical experience. Perhaps one day Mark's play will be printed as a good Quarto so we may fawn there upon the words that entertained us all that matinee day.

The artistry we were privileged to witness at Chichester was proof that divine madness still lives. The playwright himself displays the divine crackpot possession of his hero in the title of his play. And by this he leads us, as the great master did too, to laugh first at himself before we laugh at ourselves. "The BIG Secret Live "I am Shakespeare" Webcam Daytime Chat-room Show". The title will always be too cumbersome to use or to conceive; but it clothes the manifold secrets of the play which lie in the simple words, by which the play will inevitably be known if it tours with the success, that is surely inevitable. It will be called "I am Shakespeare." The long title is silvered by the same wry and knowing wink that shines in the title "Much ado about nothing".

The play mocks seriousness but is itself serious. The subject matter is tough enough to summarise at book-length like Charlton Ogburn, without trying to make fun of it. Mark Rylance's play was hilariously funny and wise; and as Dr William Leahy said afterwards with the authority of an academic, it was "learned". A high compliment that deserves repeating in much the same way that Mark correctly insisted on using the word, the title, "Doctor" in the discussion afterwards, when he invited the good doctor to the stage. I should think that the word "Doctor" in front of such an audience, that included such distinguished company, sugared that sonnet for William Leahy into his finest hour.

Words come and go, as any lover of the plays must acknowledge on every page of The Third Folio. They move around as we speak and as we write. For a few years, twenty years ago the words "word processor", for example, meant the very latest thing; the word "modern" meant the latest thing; the words "latest thing" meant the latest thing; but the words "word processor", the pair of them, are now already, like the Elizabethan word "passemayne" returning to the shadows, like the gravestones gathered to the edge of the Chichester car park, as passé now as the ruffs that enable us to date the sartorial details and the cuffs of Elizabethan noblemen as they sought to capture themselves in paint for all time.

The words "I am" however remain exactly as they have always been. They will never date. But probably you have never noticed them; like the overworked word "Love" itself, celebrated not far away from the Minerva Theatre beside An Arundel Tomb made famous by Philip Larkin in the cathedral in Chichester; the words of his poem hanging there on a board. The words "I am" in the Old Testament, came to be shorthand for the meaning of the name of God Himself, that Moses could not utter, when he came down speechless from the mountain; and which, ever after, could only be spoken in the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies. Short for "I am what I am. I am what I was. I will be what I will be"; It has been ever after written down as YHWH, a word for Hebrews and cabbalists who knew the secret way that it should be pronounced in the temple; on that one Passover Day in the calendar when it could be spoken. Very few people on earth know how to say the word. Take a deep breath.

I don't want you to think that this is irrelevant to my little essay on Mark Rylance's magisterial masterpiece. The word, the words and everything about them are fundamental to the true understanding of the play. The correct pronunciation is not Yahweh and it certainly is not Jehovah; neither is it NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) but in a way it is all three. Perhaps the name of God, and the empowering "I am" should remain unspoken. It is truly the deepest secret and even when it has been revealed you will see, that in human speech, this word will always remain unspoken. It cannot be pronounced without stopping everything that you are doing. It does not fit well into the small talk and tetragrammatons that pass before us as speech. It is a word of the monumental Masons (Mark Rylance tells us among the text that he is not one), It is used in their ceremonies and is evoked in their stone-cutting business when the sculptor's mallet hits a thumb. It is first an intake of breath.

Open your mouth a little; place your tongue near the roof of your mouth to constrict the space so

that when you breathe in deeply you make the sound of a breeze. Now think of the letters Y and H and say them breathing inwards like this: Yeeeeee. The longer you breathe in like this the surer it will be that you pronounce the second part correctly, the W and the H. You must say the Wah part only by breathing OUT. This takes a little practice. Breathe in for Ye and out for Wah.

Take a long time over the word. This is the only word in the world that can be spoken with an intake of breath. If you listen you will hear an exact match of sound and sense. "I am" means "The Breath of Life". It means inspiration. The meaning of the words, the essence of all meditation is the word "I am". We do it all the time, we breathe in, we breathe out; but by our breaths we rarely notice it. If you try and pass on this information you will foul up conversation as much as the mention halts a review such as this. You will only be able to do it with great difficulty. Try it. You must stop everything to say this word. Say it like this to anyone. You will soon appreciate its magic; and of course if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

This is a very important play for Mark Rylance. You will be able to read many synopses in the throwaway dailies that provide a narrative of the delightful mayhem that kept us awed for two hours in Chichester; but unless you read the programme before or afterwards you'll not know how important the film *Spartacus* is to the playwright.

Spartacus, after 1960, was for many years my favourite film. In those days if you saw a film in one year you could never ever see it again; no videos or DVDs. I remember treasuring the coloured souvenir book of the film which I bought many years later when it was remaindered in Woolworth's. Film back then, therefore, maintained a stronger grip upon the imagination. Jean Simmons for many years remained the archetype of the woman of my dreams, at least her shoulders informed most of them; but the sad end of the film was the most memorable of all when *Spartacus* is crucified and Jean Simmons, (Varinia) is lifting up her new born baby for the hero to see as he dies. An unforgettable scene. I am sure on that day, for *Spartacus*, as for Christ, the skies cracked and the veil of the temple was rent and the earth opened.

In the body of the play Mark Rylance reminds us that the author of any work is rarely celebrated. To prove it, the decidedly unknown author of *Spartacus* was named as Howard Fast. In the programme Mark Rylance tells us that he was that new born baby at the end of *Spartacus* held up by the beautiful Varinia. This was for Mark Rylance his earliest appearance on screen. Celebrity trivia. I cannot imagine what such a benediction does for a new born child, except to say that it has brought about this magical play. Madame Blavatski and a few other lunatics in the twenties had a vision that the Messiah would be born in India on a certain day. The baby was born and brought up as the new Messiah. His name was Krishnamurti. He rejected the calling very publicly; although in a way he did not. Krishnamurti was marked for life in the same way that Mark Rylance has been marked. Both can find confirmation for profound beliefs in the unavoidable orchestrations of their earliest days.

At the end of the film *Spartacus* all the captive slaves are gathered in a natural amphitheatre where they are promised freedom instead of crucifixion if they point out the man *Spartacus*. Kirk Douglas, being the real man he is, stands to call out "I am *Spartacus*" to save his fellows; but his close friend Tony Curtis interrupts with "I am *Spartacus*"; and in the end the whole hillside resounds with the words; and each slave, by this joyous shout, is condemned to die. A cinematic masterpiece. The baby comes right at the end. The fruit of the entire struggle is the new life.

This is a vital play by Mark and because it comes from his heart, as it did surely for Shakespeare, so it is that we are moved to laugh or moved not to cry. There was a little understandable hesitation at the end of the stage business when Frank Charlton, the irrepressible but divine nerd, cried, "I am Shakespeare". Who would be first in the audience to take up the cry? Would it be me? Almost ! But I held on like everyone else; until the pressure to respond to the marvellous play was too strong. There are two sides in any play, the dramatist and the audience, the breathing in and the breathing out. As Shakespeare himself said, having seen the shipwreck of all his hopes on stage: "Give me your hands" It is more important for an audience to move the playwright. I cannot imagine what

dear Mark thought when he received that accolade of a thousand massed voices saying "I am Shakespeare" except to acknowledge, as we all did, that within the boast there was something of The Truth, that is the eternal magic of saying "I am".