

All the World's a Stage

by Keppiehed

Collection of linked stories about a theater community.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is a collection of linked stories that I wrote for a contest at Brigit's Flame in October. I didn't know the prompts beforehand, but it ended up working out quite nicely. Story #2 was a winner for that week. The quotes sprinkled throughout and the titles for weeks 2-4 come from the Bard himself. Also, warnings vary throughout, but mostly it is rated for language. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the work of my splendid editors, Thorarosebird (who also issued me the challenge to link my stories) and Toxic_Apiaceae.

Title: Ingénue

Prompt: "hero"

She was Hero to his Claudio that season, and what a season to remember. Olivia could still recall when she first met the actor who'd been cast as her opposite; he had all the dazzle and verve that a Claudio should possess. His eyes snapped with passion...good looks were a given...but he wasn't too threatening to overshadow the Benedick or the Don Pedro. It was an ensemble production, after all, and everyone had to share the attention.

It was inevitable that they would sleep together, a bore of predictability even for the two of them. Their chemistry was palpable, as it needed to be, and they didn't even get through the days of the dry readings before they were shagging like rabbits anywhere they could...behind the set pieces, in the park on the way to the pub or in the alleyway next to the stage door after a particularly heady run. Those days were magic, and Olivia still smiled when she thought of the rush. Like a comet, they had blazed brilliant and fast in an arc so bright it could burn, only meant for the moment.

She'd played Juliet a few times after that...and once, Ophelia...but she'd never been any of the real titans of the stage. She'd left before she'd graduated to the greats: Lady MacBeth or Desdemona. Not many made it that far, and by then the spotlights were beginning to glare a little too harshly and the makeup was crumbling and greasy on her cheeks. The tricks of the trade were revealed to be just that, and the delight that youth brought had somehow evaporated. The old words were tired on her lips, the applause too polite. It had been so long since she even remembered why she played dress-up and recited a dead-man's words to an audience full of children who just wanted to cut class for the afternoon. That had never been her dream. *What was her dream, again?*

Olivia left the business and only brought out the costumes for Renaissance Faires. After the girls were born, they wouldn't quite lace up in the back anymore, and the circlets looked foolish...or worse...upon hair that had been sensibly shorn and was beginning to show signs of gray. Olivia relegated them to the basement, where all memories of youth were kept.

The gowns came out at Halloween and for dress-up, and by then Olivia didn't feel the stab that always used to follow when she caught sight of what might have been. She'd heard from someone that Robert was still treading the boards, and had even had quite a bit of success through the years at the old Festival. His name meant something there. He was a star of the stage. Or as close as an actor not in films could be.

Olivia frowned and remembered what it was like to stand before the expectant crowd, when things were good. When the people waited with bated breath to hear not so much what you would say, but how you would say it. When they were entranced with your gestures, your manner and the flair that only you could bring to the act. When the men drank in the sight of you from their seats, gilded by the glow of the stage lights, and the women admired your grace. Olivia sifted through her thoughts and tried to bring forth a soliloquy, a reading, anything from all those years, but her mind drew a blank.

"And counsel him to fight against his passion ... for my heart is exceeding heavy ..." Olivia could only remember those bare snippets, nothing more. They played in her head over and over, an endless refrain...lament or warning, she couldn't tell, nor was she in the mood to decipher the vagaries of her faulty memory. They said an actor's lines stuck with them forever, that the text never faded, but then *they* said a lot of things that turned out to be rubbish. Olivia brushed the crown from her head and packed it away with the gowns that were beginning to show signs of age and moths. She taped up the box and put the yellowing scripts away. There was no time for nonsense now. This was her life, and regret was for someone else.

Olivia heaved the box onto the top shelf, out of sight, but not quite out of mind.

Title: Cue for Passion

Prompt: "henchman"

"If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart ... " Robert let his voice swell and choke just a little with emotion. This was it; this was where he hooked them. "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain ... " He could hear hushed sobbing from a lady in the front row. He let his voice lose strength and falter as he gave the last line. He could almost feel every eye in the house unblinking and trained on him. This was what he lived for, this very moment. Never had he felt so alive as when he was dying. "The rest is silence."

The applause was thunderous. Robert waited until the stage fell dark, exit stage left. Hamlet's miraculous resurrection for curtain call twice a day and a matinee on Saturdays was a huge commercial success as well as a professional one.

By the time he made his appearance, his high was already waning. Shouts and stamps, whistles for the star of the show were nice, but nothing could top the zenith, that moment that had them all spellbound. Though they were clapping for him, their attention was already dispersing. He'd had them in his thrall for a time, and now it was over. Robert bowed, the smile almost real, and then he turned his back on the audience, their adulation already so much background noise.

The chaos that followed backstage was typical; theater folks couldn't seem to organize themselves for longer than a two hour show. Robert had been around long enough now to see even the pattern in that, and he smiled indulgently at the flowers for the excited ingénues, the chatter of the stagehands who compared how fast the set changes had gone. Robert threaded his way past them all to the sanctuary of his dressing room...private, thank you...and took off the doublet for Costuming. He knew the drill, and Marge from Props was a right tyrant whom he had learned to avoid provoking over the years. Had he slept with her? He couldn't remember, but she acted like a woman scorned, that was for sure. He hung up the vest and frilled shirt so that he wouldn't have reason to face her wrath in the morning. At least, not for that infraction.

Robert was still wiping the greasepaint from his forehead when his door opened and the director popped in. "Nicely done, as always. A few notes, though. Mary Beth wanted me to ask you to slow down in Act two, Scene..."

"Mary Beth?" Robert asked. He frowned as he removed his wig. Did it always stand up in the back like that on stage? Why didn't someone mention that he looked like an ass?

"Yes, Robert. Mary Beth? Gertrude?" Jim sounded exasperated. "You're even worse this season than last about knowing the cast names. Come on."

Robert shrugged and checked himself in the mirror. "Who is Gertrude to tell me about the pacing? *Hamlet* sets the pacing in that scene, not his mother. How many soliloquies does Gertrude have? Is Mary Kay's name on the marquee? Hm?"

"Mary Beth." Jim sighed. "Nice attitude, Rob."

Robert pulled his eyelid up a millimeter. Was it getting droopy?

"Okay, then. I'll tell her we discussed it. Thanks for being a team player." Jim turned to go.

"Oh, wait," Robert stood up. "When are we assembling at The Black Arrow? Nine, as usual?"

"No, no. I can't make it. I don't think we're doing that this season." Jim shuffled his feet. "Listen, I've got to give the rest of the cast these notes..."

"Not doing it? What do you mean?" Robert frowned. "It's tradition. We always meet there for drinks after the show."

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, it isn't the old bunch, you know? Look around, Rob. Times have changed. And people with them."

"No. So we have a new Gertrude. What about Polonius? Who is it?" Robert narrowed his eyes as he tried to recall.

"It used to be Tom Smythe. But he moved south. Now it's Reid. Reid McDaniels."

"Oh. Well, what about Rozencrantz and Guildenstern? They're always good for a laugh," Robert sighed. They were older, but still mainstays in the theater community.

"Retired this year." Jim put on his glasses. "They're touring the Midwest together on vacation, I heard. I think they're going to get married, in one of those states where it's legal."

Robert felt a sickness rise in the pit of his stomach. What was happening? "Well, where are the old guard, then? I won't have a drink with Laertes, you know our past. I never could stand that guy; what a preening peacock. What about Horatio? Or even Claudius, for Crissakes?"

"You couldn't have a drink with Laertes now even if you wanted. He hasn't been here in ages. Jesus, Robert. Haven't you looked at the cast once during rehearsal? You're the last one left. Everyone else got out of the game. In fact ..." Jim wouldn't look at him. "I didn't want to tell you like this, but after this season, I'm out, too. The wife and I have some property in..."

"*What?*" Robert felt like someone had landed a sucker punch to his gut, and he was still reeling. "What the hell are you talking about? We're young yet. Retiring? Get serious!"

Jim fell silent for a moment. "Robert. I'm sixty-five. I've been in this business for too long. I had another heart attack this year, and the doc says I can't survive one more."

"A second heart attack? When did you have the first one?" Robert thought back, but he couldn't remember a time that Jim hadn't been there. He had clear memories of all of his seasons onstage, and *someone* had directed him to his glory. Hadn't it been Jim?

Evidently not. Jim was giving him a look, one laced with what appeared to be a mixture of pity and disgust. "Listen, I have to go. The others are waiting for me..."

"Wait!" Panic rose. "Do you think Ophelia would care to go for drinks?"

Jim shook off his restraining hand. "It's *Felicity*, for fuck's sake. And no. She has kids, don't you get it? Everyone has someone else. Felicity has two kids, and she leaves right after her death scene, if you'd pay any attention. It's over, Robert. I'll see you tomorrow. And watch your pacing in Act two. That's from your director, not your mother." With that, Jim left.

Robert sat down heavily at his dressing table. He gazed with unseeing eyes at the newspaper clippings of his reviews through the years. He didn't have to read them to know what they said; he'd memorized the stellar critiques of his performances and he knew that every one held him in the highest regard. Why, then, was he so empty now? Why did he feel the weight of his years upon him with nothing to show for it?

Robert blinked, and looked upon his hands. They were those of an older man. He saw his face in the mirror, and though he wasn't ancient, the lines were etched more deeply than before. Soon he wouldn't be able to play the Hamlets and the MacBeths. Soon he would be relegated to the King Lear and the Lepiduses. Could it be true? It felt too early in his career for that.

It seemed only yesterday that he had gotten his start as one of the nameless henchmen in Richard II. How he remembered his ambition; it was an unquenchable thirst that burned in his throat, that craving for more. He stood upon that stage in his drab little tunic and watched those men perform around him, really *live* those lines, and he knew that was what he could be doing, but better, if they would give him the chance. He wouldn't wait for them to give it, he would take it.

And so he had. He'd taken every role along the way, played every damned Dogberry and Trinculo until he made it to the shining pinnacle, and now there was no one above him. It was his name they cried. It was *his* role that was the lead, each and every performance, and there was nothing better in this world, was there? To be loved by the public, to be admired by his fans.

To be alone.

Robert stood and gathered his things to take back to his flat. It wasn't a long walk. He had nowhere else to go. He supposed he should be grateful for the silence in his home after the shouting and vigor of the stage. For the darkness that would greet him after the brightness of the spotlight. He could hear the rest of the cast chattering, but he slipped out the stage door exit and made his way home. Tomorrow would come soon enough, and the show would begin anew. He had to be ready for the next performance, always the next performance. That was all that mattered in this world. *His* world, which he had made, and which he still owned.

For now.

Title: We Lay Our Scene

Prompt: "lover"

"I still don't get this part. Can you explain the Nurse's motivation here? Why would she procure a ladder here? Isn't she trying to *protect* Juliet? That doesn't seem very nurse-like to me. I need more to go on. Can we have another conference so that I can really *feel* what it would be like to be inside her head like that?"

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "We've been through this, Kerry. Just do what you think is best. It's actually not that big of a part."

"What?" Kerry frowned. "How can you say that? It's a very big part! All of Juliet's moral foundation rests on the Nurse."

Jim sighed. "Then do what you do best: act. I leave the interpretation in your capable hands."

"But..."

"Act three, Scene five. From the top!" Jim cut her off. He knew the Nurse was in that scene, and he sighed in relief as Kerry waddled off to find her cue.

God save him from actors. Jim watched the action on stage, but it barely registered. He hated this play. He hated them all by now. This was his fifth production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and it was getting more detestable every time he staged it. He was cursed with a gay Romeo and a goth Juliet this time around. What was wrong with kids these days? He groaned and ripped the foil off an antacid tablet. He was getting old. The fact that he was directing a play full of love and hope and could actually think about 'kids these days' ought to be a sign that he was the wrong man for the job. But he kept churning them out, year after year.

It hadn't always been like that. There had been a time...so long ago now he could hardly remember it, and it had taken on a sepia glow even in his own memories...that he'd wanted to be here. He'd had passion for this. Jim laughed. Had he been a passionate man? Yes, back when the words meant something, when he had vision and a full head of hair. When he wanted to put on a play and show the audience that there could be life and so much significance still to be found in tradition. He had wanted to set the world on fire, to show the audience what *he* saw. To share those concepts with as many people as he could.

Then he had met the actors. The endless stream of actors, who liked to think they were all so frigging different and creative, but Jim could tell them a thing or two about that. They were all the same: egotistical. They were the most selfish, self-centered lot of any bunch he'd come across, and over the years, he'd had to battle every line of his plays with them. They all had an "idea" about how they wanted to play their own Cleopatras and Caesars, but they couldn't see the bigger picture. They could only see their own reflection in the mirror, and it drove him mad. They were an unending procession of arrogant, squabbling children.

Jim sighed. "That was good, but Lady Montague, you need to be downstage more in the second half of the scene. We've gone over this. At this point, you need to know your blocking, please."

"I know, Jim, but I still think that the lighting is bad for my speech. Can't I be upstage just a tad more?" Evangeline pouted.

Jim gritted his teeth. "If you're upstage, then Kristin will be muffled. And Juliet has important lines here, yes? Take it from 'the villain Romeo', and do it the way I directed you."

He hadn't envisioned the fighting. He hadn't known that over the years they would wear him into this tired caricature of an old man. He was a stooped husk of a person in a cardigan, for Crissakes! Jim had a vague recollection of wearing a beanie at one point in his life, but now he was invisible, popping blood-pressure meds and more worried about his stress than if the foreshadowing at the end of scene three was too blatant.

He hadn't wanted to be this person. He wanted to be hopeful, not this jaded shell. He'd gone into this line of work for that very reason, not to have his ideals leached away. He wished there was someone to blame for his indifference. It would be nice to have a villain here. In Shakespeare, things were always so defined. He wanted to have a duel with his enemy and shriek "It was you! You are responsible for the death of my art!" and be justified. A good swordfight seemed awfully cathartic.

Yet when he looked around, there he was in the same darkened theater. The seasons had rolled by him heavier each year. The audience clapped just as heartily, no matter what he staged, whether it be his best effort or his worst. There were the same actors with different faces, waiting for him to guide them so that they could ignore him in the end.

"Well, death's the end of it *all*," Kerry said.

Jim winced. Her tone was too strident and melodramatic for the Nurse. She was trying to overshadow Juliet again, and it didn't take much because Kristin was about as lackluster a Juliet as they'd had. Jim was about to mention it, and then he sat back. Did it matter, in the end? Did the audience know the difference between a good production and a bad one? The thought had steadily depressed him for years. He had an ulcer in his gut that you could fit a golf ball through, but Jim was finally finished worrying. As he watched the actors waltz around and butcher the play, he decided he couldn't take it anymore. He was contractually obligated to direct next season's

Hamlet with Robert St. Vincent...that ass...and then he would retire.

"And ... scene!" called Lucy, the lighting director. "You want to run it another time? Should I cue up the balcony scene?"

"Nope." Jim smiled. "I've seen all I need to."

Title: Green in Judgment

Prompt: "foil"

Sara picked at a notch in her fingernail until it became a jagged tear. She caught the rough edge between her teeth and pulled until the entire white lunula came free with a satisfying burn. A tell-tale metallic taste spilled onto her tongue, and she knew she'd bitten down to the quick. Dammit. Her mother was going to have a cow if she got blood on this dress. It was dry clean only.

As if on cue, her mother looked over and frowned. "Honey, don't."

Sara rolled her eyes and glanced around the theater, which was starting to fill up with old people. God, could it get any more boring? It was bad enough that she had to read this shit in school, and now her parents were forcing her to come and watch it onstage? Sara coughed as the cloying perfume...some sort of stale musk...from a blue-hair in the next seat wafted over. She had to be the only person under the age of fifty-five in the whole place. She hefted a sigh to make her displeasure known, in case the last three dramatic groans hadn't cued her folks in to her state of extreme unhappiness.

"Did you know that this theater was built in..."

"I don't *care*, Dad," Sara cut him off and narrowed her eyes, but the effect was lost under the dimness of the house lights.

"Well, excuse me for living. I just thought you might want to know a little something about the history of the place. It's fascinating stuff." Her father was perpetually cheerful. In an annoying way.

Sara made a point of leaning away, but not so far as to bump elbows with the old lady who was hogging the adjoining armrest. Would this thing never start?

"So, I says to Bernie, you get what you get when you eat like that. He should know better, what with his gout. But he can't leave the orange juice alone, bless his poor heart ..." Blue-Hair was talking to her friend, a woman with a God-awful ugly shawl.

"Oh. My. *God*," Sara said under her breath and shifted away from the conversation taking place to her left, but it was too late. She'd already heard more than she cared to about gout. She shuddered. This place was crawling with ancient people. Why couldn't she have gone to the movies with her friends? They must be having a great time, and she was totally missing it! Sara crossed her arms. She would never forget this injustice foisted upon her by her parents. She just hoped no one saw her here.

"It's a shame that Jim Wardenburg retired. Did you get a chance to see his Hamlet? Superb. I didn't realize at the time that it was going to be his directorial swan song, and I'm so lucky I am a season ticket holder." Blue-Hair was saying.

"I missed it, but I saw his Romeo and Juliet the year before that. He just got better every year, didn't he? I wonder how this new director will fare? Twelfth Night can be tricky, and I do so hope he hasn't done it with a heavy hand. Nothing worse than a preachy Orsino, if you ask me," Ugly-Shawl sniffed.

Nobody did ask you; don't have a heart attack over it, Sara thought. The house lights blinked, signaling the imminent beginning of the play, and not a moment too soon, in her opinion. At least the peanut gallery would quit their yapping.

She had read this play in Honors English, so she knew what to expect. This was going to be so lame. Sara sat back and folded her arms, prepared to suffer through a few hours of old-English nonsense.

"If music be the food of love, play on!"

Sara's eyes were drawn of their own accord to the actor who said the lines with such joviality. He was rather handsome, actually. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad time after all if she had him to look at.

Curio spoke up: "Will you go hunt, my lord?" Even he seemed into this. Sara relaxed a little. It didn't sound nearly as dry with this crowd of handsome young men speaking their lines so enthusiastically.

She watched Orsino as he spoke again. He was really very compelling; all of his lines sounded so natural. It didn't seem like Shakespeare at all the way he said the dialogue. Sara peeked at the program. Reid McDaniels. He was only a few years older than she was! Sara was amazed. How could someone *her age* be up there onstage, acting in such a professional role? How long had he been doing this? She made a mental note to read up on his history at the intermission. Right now she wanted to pay attention.

This was not turning out at all the way she had expected. The actors stopped being actors after a time. They became the Duke, who was desperately in love with Lady Olivia, and Sebastian ... and what a bitter love triangle, when Viola got involved as Cesario! Sara laughed and groaned, and when the foolish Sir Andrew challenged Cesario to a duel, she cringed. The foils came out, and Sara breathed a sigh of relief when no one was harmed, even though she knew the ending. To see it unfold in front of her eyes, to hear the lines spoken by people who cared ... she had never been so entranced. Was there ever so clever a play to have been written? This had romance, heart-break, action and feats of derring-do. Why had she never realized it before? It had taken seeing it onstage for her to realize the magic of the story.

When the Clown said his final words, and all was set to right at last, no one clapped louder than Sara in the whole of the audience. When Viola took her bow, Sara gave her a standing ovation.

"Eh. I've seen better," Sara heard Blue-Hair say as they filed out. "I should have gone to the MacBeth instead. At least we would have been able to see Robert St. Vincent. Now *there's* an actor, and make no mistake."

"Did you like it?" Sara's dad asked, just as she was about to fire back an indignant retort on behalf of the entire cast and crew. "I know this isn't really your thing."

Sara turned to him. "Whoever said it wasn't? You always think you know everything, Dad. You know what, I've changed my mind. I think I want to be an actress someday! I don't know why I never thought of it before. If that Reid guy can do it, well ... I can, too. Just think of it! I'll bet they have the most glamorous lives. Imagine being able to entertain people with Shakespeare! I'd never be sorry if I could do that for a living. "

"Um, that's the key. For a living, right, dear? I don't exactly see you as the type to starve for your art." Sara's dad laughed, and nudged her mom. They moved into the aisle with the rest of the departing crowd.

Sara bristled. "Why is it always about money with you? I could bring the words alive. I'd make people happy. I would never regret it. An actor's life, now *that's* the life for me!"

It was probably for the best that she didn't see the looks on her parents' faces as she flounced up the aisle, her head full of dreams of limelight and happy endings.