

Tudors

THE PLAYHOUSE BY NIGEL BRYANT

1597. London street: carts and people passing. Sounds of a rattling lock and a wooden thump: Moll Townsend is being placed in the stocks.

MOLL Alright, alright, not so 'ard!

HEFTY MAN Into the stocks wiv yer - best place for yer insolence an all!

MOLL Owww! Mind me 'ead!

2nd HEFTY MAN Yer 'ead's what gets you into trouble, gal - it's too hot! An' you're too fond o' usin' the mouth what's in it!

MOLL [V/O] 'E could 'ave a point. But sometimes I just can't 'elp meself. An' if they 'ad their way, we women'd never talk at all! We're inferior, see - that's what we're told. Supposed to obey 'em, whatever they say - uncles, bruvvers, cousins, you name it. As for 'usbands - don't fink I'll bover gettin' wed! But that's all we're meant to do, women: marry, 'ave children, look after 'em. They say that's what God commands, but I don't know how they know that. Maybe it says it in the Bible, but how would I know? I can't read. No-one teaches girls to read. But I know what I'd do if I could read...and if it was allowed...

FX We're in a Shakespearean theatre. A huge, excited audience has gathered. On stage Robert, playing Juliet, is saying:

ROBERT How camest thou hither, Romeo, and wherefore?

While the play continues in the background with the following lines, Moll continues in voice-over:

MOLL [V/O] I'd be on the stage! Oh, I'd love it! And if you want to know how I got 'ere, stuck in the stocks, that's where it began: in the theatre, last Monday! I'd seen loads o' plays but that was the best! *Romeo and Juliet!* If only I could'a bin up there on the stage - I'd'a been a better Juliet than 'im!





For a brief moment we hear the play in the foreground again:

ROBERT If they do see thee, they will murder thee!

FX *Then the play returns to the background while Moll continues talking to us.*

MOLL [V/O] I mean, no offence - fair play to 'im, 'e's a good actor - an' 'e's a good mate o' mine, is Robert - I think 'e likes me, an' all. But what's a man doin' playin' a girl? I could do it a thousand times better! But we're not allowed. So lads like Robert play all our parts! An' the only way I can get to work in a theatre is by sellin' oranges...

FX *The words of the play are lost as we hear music.*

It was freezin' cold on Monday, with flecks o' snow in all the drizzle, but the audience were still in a merry mood cos the play was so good...

Again the play comes briefly to the fore:

NURSE Fie, how my bones ache! What a jaunce have I had!

MOLL [V/O] Then on comes Juliet's Nurse! She's great, too - a real good laugh - but of course it's another man!

NURSE You know not how to choose a man: Romeo! no, not he; though his face be better than any man's, yet his leg excels all men's; and for a hand, and a foot, and a body, though they be not to be talked on, yet they are past compare!

The audience laughs and applauds. Fade on this, and crossfade to tavern. A tankard put down.

MOLL [V/O] After the play Robert took me to the tavern - no way I could go there on me own - not a woman!

ROBERT What a performance! The audience were in ecstasy!

MOLL So was I. I love *Romeo and Juliet*, an' I love that theatre.

ROBERT Mmm - excellent. Too bad it's not ours.

MOLL What d'you mean?

ROBERT It doesn't belong to our company. Master Shakespeare and the rest of us, we're only hiring it because the lease on our last theatre's run out. We tried to open one of our own across the river - but no luck.



- MOLL Why? What's the problem?
- ROBERT The people in the neighbourhood objected.
- MOLL Objected? To 'avin' a theatre? What's the matter wiv 'em?!
- ROBERT They were worried about the noise and "the common sort" they thought it would attract.
- MOLL They don't know nuffin'...
- ROBERT I should go. I've so much to do. I've got till the morning to write out a dozen parts.
- MOLL What?
- ROBERT Master Shakespeare's given me the new play he's written, and I'm helping to make copies for all the actors.
- MOLL What, you got to write out the whole play twelve times?
- ROBERT Course not, Moll! No, I just copy out each actor's own lines for him - just his lines and the lines right before his, so he knows when to speak. I don't mind doing it - it's a good way to learn my own! "Away, you cut-purse rascal! You filthy bung, away! By wine, I'll thrust my knife in your mouldy chaps!"
- MOLL What're you on about?
- ROBERT It's my next part! Not a bit like Juliet - her name's Doll Tearsheet and she's got a bit of a mouth on her!
- MOLL Wish I could make up insults like that. "You cut-purse rascal! You filthy bung!"
- ROBERT Sounds good when you say it.
- MOLL Yeah. It would do.
- ROBERT Come to the theatre early tomorrow, Moll. Sword fighting. You can watch us practicing...
- MOLL [V/O] So today I did as Robert said and turned up good an' early, hoping to watch 'em practisin' their sword-fight for this afternoon's play. But when I arrive they're all standin' in a huddle havin' a terrible row. The Mayor o' London 'imself has turned up, and he's tellin' 'em...**



- MAYOR This theatre is closed!
- BURBAGE Closed?
- MAYOR By order of Her Majesty the Queen's Privy Council.
- While the argument between Burbage and the Mayor rages on in the background Moll asks Robert:*
- MOLL What's goin' on, Robert?
- ROBERT They're closing us down because of another company's play!
- MOLL What?
- ROBERT It played here last week and it's caused a scandal.
- MOLL Why?
- ROBERT It likened the queen's court to a pack of dogs - I think that's reason enough!
- FX The argument in the background now comes to the fore
- MAYOR You're lucky you weren't closed long ago! Your "plays" do nothing but corrupt our youth.
- BURBAGE With respect, sir, I -
- MAYOR They daily draw servants and tradesmen from their work. And the rest of your audience are thieves and horse stealers, and tricksters, and traitors - idle and dangerous men!
- MOLL What's 'e talkin' about?
- ROBERT Shh! Moll, he's the Mayor!
- MOLL I don't care who 'e is -
- BURBAGE Sir, the Queen herself has summoned us to play at Whitehall Palace at Christmas. We perform our plays before the public here so that they be ready and worthy for Her Majesty.
- MAYOR Not here. You'll have to find a different place to sell your wares. This theatre is closed. Good day.



- FX *We hear the Mayor striding away.*
- MOLL *[Under her breath, but a bit too loud]* You cut-purse rascal! You filthy bung!
- MAYOR *[Walking angrily towards Moll]* What's she doing here? You have a woman in your company?
- ROBERT No, sir, she's -
- MAYOR You know it's strictly forbidden for any woman to appear on any stage.
- MOLL Yeah, we all know it's strictly forbidden, like everythin' else is forbidden to women!
- ROBERT Moll, don't be -
- MOLL You close this theatre, you know how many livelihoods are lost?
- MAYOR Who is this woman?
- MOLL What's that line, Robert? "I'll thrust my knife in your mouldy chaps"?
- MAYOR Have respect, woman! Know your place and respect your betters!
- MOLL My betters? You think you're my better? How can you be better when you can't see what a theatre is? Folk who can only pay a penny know it better than you!
- MAYOR Stop this woman's tongue!
- MOLL Nothing will be better in this country till those who know and do are the rulers, not those who happen to be born rich!
- MAYOR Arrest this woman!
- From the scuffle as she's seized, crossfade to the street where Moll is fixed in the stocks.*
- MOLL [V/O] Maybe I shouldn't have said it all...maybe I should. Either way it's brought me here: to the stocks, with a paper nailed beside me head - not that I can read it o'course: no-one's ever taught me - but I suppose it's tellin' everyone what I did.**
- HEFTY MAN How many lashes was it?



2nd HEFTY MAN Twenty.

MOLL [V/O]

And now they're going to whip me. But there's one thing I'll never forget: I got to say Doll Tearsheet's lines - written by Master Shakespeare himself...and in the theatre!

A loud lash of a whip, and a strangled cry of pain from Moll. Fade on the sounds of whipping and Moll's struggles not to wail.