



Equivocation

by
Bill Cain

Know-the-Show Audience Guide

researched and written by
the Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre
of New Jersey





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Equivocation: *An Introduction*

***“Remember, remember!
The fifth of November,
The Gunpowder treason and plot;
I know of no reason
Why the Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!”***

-English Folk Verse (c. 1870)

Equivocation is based on a historical event.

It is, in fact, the founding event of Modern England.

The Gunpowder Plot, also known as the Treason Plot, was a failed assassination attempt against King James I of England and VI of Scotland by a group of provincial English Catholics led by Robert Catesby. Having rented a room next door to the House of Parliament, the conspirators managed to get 36 barrels of gunpowder into the cellar of the House of Lords. On November 5th, 1605, Guy Fawkes was left to light the fuse, but was caught at the eleventh hour. He was then sent to the Tower of London where he was tortured and gave up the names of the other conspirators.



Contemporary engraving of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, by Crispijn van de Passe.

To this day, the 5th of November is celebrated with national fireworks and is roughly the equivalent to America's 4th of July.

The story has been told for over 400 years, and the government's version of the story has become a national myth.

The only thing we know with certainty about the event itself is that it could not possibly have occurred in the way the government claimed.

Equivocation offers a plausible alternative.



Bill Cain: *About the Playwright*



Bill Cain (photo: Jenny Graham).

Bill Cain was raised in New York City, and saw numerous plays throughout his high school years. Following his graduation from Boston College in 1970, he co-founded the Boston Shakespeare Company of which he was artistic director for seven years.

His first play, *Stand-Up Tragedy*, was a success

at its 1989 Los Angeles opening, but it did not fare well when it moved to New York. The play did, however, get him noticed in the L.A. writers community, and he was soon writing for television and film, including *Nothing Sacred* (co-creator/writer/producer) which aired on ABC; *Nightjohn*, which was named best American film of the year by *The New Yorker*; *Thicker Than Blood* (TNT), which was an adaptation of *Stand-Up Tragedy*; *Everything That Rises*; *Papa's Angels*; and *Sounder*.

Equivocation came nearly two decades after his first play. It premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2009, and received the Steinberg Award for best original play staged at a Regional Theatre. His next play, *9 Circles*, opened in 2010 and also won the Steinberg Award, making Cain the only playwright to receive the prestigious award in consecutive years. He has received numerous other honors for his writing, including multiple Edgerton grants, Helen Hayes Awards, the Joe A. Callaway Award, a Peabody Award, LA Critics Award, the WGA Award for Episodic Drama and a Christopher Award, among others.

In addition to being a playwright and screenwriter, Cain is also a Jesuit priest.



The Life of William Shakespeare



National Portrait Gallery, London

William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood,

though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-on-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592, he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely

popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. While the plays were well-liked, Shakespeare's work was not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.

A Man of Many Words

Shakespeare used over 20,000 different words in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (approximately 1,700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them. Many of these are still in use today, including "alligator" (*Romeo and Juliet*), "assassination" (*Macbeth*), "puking" (*As You Like It*), and "swagger" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), to name only a few.

To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the *King James Bible* uses only 8,000 different words.



Equivocation: *A Synopsis*

Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil to plot, consider skipping this section. It is 1606 and the acclaimed writer, William Shagspeare, is meeting with the Prime Minister of England, Sir Robert Cecil. Cecil has a commission for Shag: he wants Shag to dramatize the recently foiled Gunpowder Plot. Sensing the difficulty in illustrating a recent political event in the “proper light” (and the consequences should he fail to do so) Shag immediately refuses. Cecil, a powerful and dangerous man, insists that Shag write the play; Cecil knows Shag is a gifted artist who is able to influence the way an audience responds to the events and characters depicted in his plays.

Shag returns to the Globe Theatre where his company, composed of the actors Richard, Nate, Armin, and Sharpe, is in rehearsal for *King Lear*. Shag announces the commission. The entire company, save Shag, is thrilled at the idea of dramatizing the Powder Plot. Shag is hesitant, but the company votes to accept the commission. Richard offers Shag encouragement, and Shag starts working on the play.

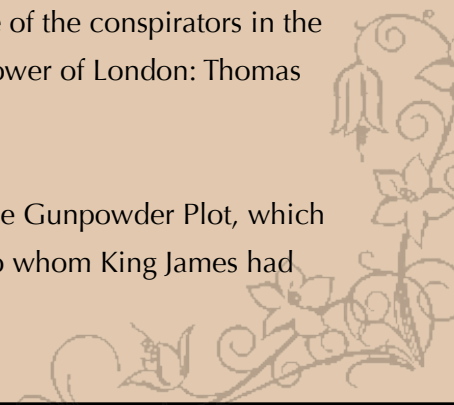
After a few days, Shag is interrupted by his daughter, Judith. She collects the scattered pages of an early draft of the play from where Shag is working and makes revisions. Shag’s relationship with his daughter is visibly tense; they can’t communicate with one another, and their

conversation suggests that this has been so since Judith’s brother died. Shag, disturbed by Judith’s presence, rejects Judith’s suggestion to cut a soliloquy at the top of the play, and plunges into rehearsal with his first draft.

The actors run through a scene from Shag’s first draft and are forced to concede that Shag’s initial reservations regarding the material are correct: the government-sanctioned version of the story, in which the plot is thwarted easily by divine intervention, does not lend itself to dramatization or believability. As the actors discuss the play, they realize the serious lack of logic with the government’s presentation of the event.

Shag meets with Cecil again to discuss the problems with the plot. Cecil dismisses Shag’s concerns; Cecil accepts that the mathematical skill and intelligence of the Jesuit priests is enough to incriminate them. Shag says that he needs to speak with one of the priests, but Cecil hasn’t captured any. Instead, Cecil can allow Shag to visit one of the conspirators in the plot who is still alive and imprisoned in the Tower of London: Thomas Wintour.

Tom Wintour recounts to Shag the origin of the Gunpowder Plot, which involved Robert Catesby and Thomas Percy, to whom King James had





falsely promised religious toleration. At the meeting Tom, Catesby and Percy discussed the particulars of the plot before debating the ethics of killing a king. Catesby told the conspirators how he was advised by the priest, Father Henry Garnet, and Tom spoke in favor of the plot.

Shag incorporates the details he learns from Tom into his play. Shag's approach to the material is becoming clear to the actors. He intends an honest telling of the events, sympathetic to the conspirators. Richard senses the danger in performing it and tries to impress upon Shag the risk that they would be taking with the play, but Shag's growing affection for Tom has inspired a need to present the conspirators fairly.

Shag tries to bargain with Cecil to save Tom Wintour's life. He is unsuccessful, and Wintour is hanged.

Before Wintour's hanging, Cecil reveals to Shag that Wintour gave him the location of the priests involved in the plot. Father Henry Garnet is put on trial and arraigned by the State's Attorney, Edward Coke. In the trial, Garnet employs equivocation – a method of telling the truth despite the difficulty and danger in doing so in incriminating situations. He makes Coke and Cecil appear ridiculous. At the trial, Shag meets King James. Shag asks the King if he may speak with Garnet, and James grants him permission.

When Shag goes to visit Garnet in his cell, Garnet assumes that Shag has come to learn about the Powder Plot. This is not the case, though – what Shag has actually come for is to learn how to equivocate. He

wants to figure out a way of writing without compromising his beliefs. Garnet reveals to Shag the secret of equivocation and Shag, awed and inspired by the idea, employs it in the newest draft of the play.

The actors rehearse this third draft of the play, and with the exception of Sharpe, all have grave misgivings about the material. Now Shag won't back down, and is insistent upon telling the story truthfully. A fight ensues among the company members, which Judith breaks up and palliates by revealing that she's saved a draft of another one of Shag's plays, a Scottish one. Shag admits that he could adapt this play to suit Cecil's demands, and the company is overjoyed. Before they begin rehearsing *Macbeth* Armin tells Shag that Garnet has confessed to the plot.

The actors sense that Shag is in turmoil after receiving the news about Garnet. Richard encourages Shag to do what he has to do to finish the play, so he goes to see Garnet to find out why Garnet lied to him. When he talks with Garnet, however, he discovers that Garnet didn't lie at all – he confessed that he was aware of the plot, but Cecil misrepresented Garnet's words so that it would appear as though Garnet shared culpability.

Once that is resolved, Garnet asks Will to describe his new play.

Watch to see Shag's solution.



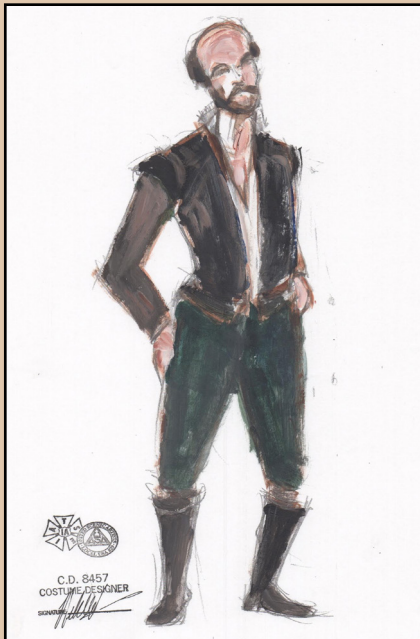
Who's Who in the Play

SHAG – William Shagspeare, a successful and celebrated playwright

ROBERT CECIL – The Prime Minister of England, a powerful, well-connected and dangerous man

RICHARD – The patriarch of Shag's troupe of actors

NATE – A reasonable, level-headed actor in Shag's troupe



SHARPE – A young, talented, potentially great actor in Shag's company; temperamental

ARMIN – A versatile player in the company

KING JAMES I – The Scottish and Protestant King of England, strategically placed on the throne by Sir Robert Cecil

Costume rendering for Shag, by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Equivocation*.

JUDITH – Shag's daughter, the twin sister of his deceased son

TOM WINTOUR – A captured conspirator in the failed Gunpowder Plot

ROBERT CATESBY – A passionate nobleman and conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot

THOMAS PERCY – A young nobleman and conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot who was falsely promised religious toleration

FATHER HENRY GARNET – A Jesuit priest accused by the State of conspiring in the Gunpowder Plot

EDWARD COKE – The State's Attorney; arraigns Garnet

Please note: Though it has many roles, Equivocation was never intended to be a large cast production. Rather, the play is cast with six actors, many of which take on more than ten characters each.



Costume rendering for Judith, by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Equivocation*.

The Rise of the Gunpowder Plot

England in the 1590s and early 1600s:

"It is a time that has given us stability, and chaos in one. A time that has given us great advances in physics, chemistry, medicine and the very physical definition of the world in which we live. It is a time that has given us the words of Shakespeare and Marlowe, and a time that has given us personalities who have long since been woven into the tapestry of who we are — Raleigh, Essex, Drake, Donne and Bacon. But it was also a time that brought conflict and violent religious turmoil. It was a time when Elizabeth and James I succeeded in galvanizing the very faith of a nation, against a backlash of insurgency, recusancy and calls for religious freedom. It was thus a time that not only nurtured treason, but provoked it, fueled it, and all too often manufactured it."

(selection from THE GUNPOWDER PLOT SOCIETY website)

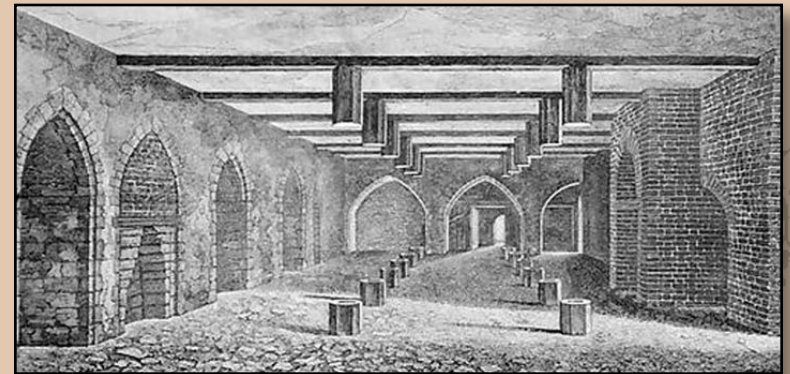
The seeds of the infamous Gunpowder Plot were sown nearly one hundred years earlier, under the reign of Henry VIII. Once a devout Catholic, Henry broke from the church when the Pope refused to grant his divorce from Catherine of Aragon in the 1520s. This began a long and often bloody conflict between England and the Catholic Church. Henry named himself the head of the newly established Church of England, dissolved the Catholic monasteries, and removed all power of Rome in England.

The years following his death were quite turbulent as religious influence and power shifted between the Anglican Church and Catholicism. Henry's son, Edward VI, pushed the Church of England towards Protestantism, but his reign was relatively short (1547-1553). "Bloody" Mary I (Edward's sister) attempted the restoration of Catholicism in England through shockingly violent means. Over 300 Protestants were burned at the stake while she was queen. Her short lived reign (1553-1558) was succeeded by Elizabeth I, who shifted England back once again to Protestantism.

Queen Elizabeth had a long and often tumultuous reign (1558-1603). Though her refusal to wed or produce an heir spawned many critics, it was her systematic attack on Catholics in England that inspired much of the animosity against her. By 1588 she had eliminated virtually all of the major challenges remaining from the Catholic Church. She had defeated the Spanish Armada, she had Mary Queen of Scots executed, and thwarted several uprisings.

Towards the end of her reign, with no heir apparent yet named, there was a newly kindled hope from Catholics that England may once again return to the fold

of Rome, and unrest was once again on the rise. The failed Essex Rebellion (1601)



The undercroft directly below the House of Lords in which the conspirators stored their gunpowder.



James I

brought many names of pro-Catholic sympathizers and agitators to the attention of Elizabeth and her advisors. One of the men was named Robert Catesby, who later proved to be one of the leaders of the Gunpowder Plot.

When James I (also James VI of Scotland) succeeded Elizabeth in 1603, Catholics rejoiced. He was the son of Mary Queen of Scots, and

the son of a Catholic monarch. James, however, was not the friend that the Catholics had hoped for. Rather, he continued the harsh treatment established by his predecessor.

In the spring of 1605, a plan was hatched to blow up the House of Lords during the State Opening of England's Parliament (November 5). The principal aim of the plot was to kill James I. Also in attendance at this event would have been the King's closest relatives, members of the Privy Council, senior judges, bishops of the Church of England, and many of the Protestant aristocracy. With these key figures removed, it was believed an easy task to instate James' daughter Elizabeth (a Catholic) as Queen.

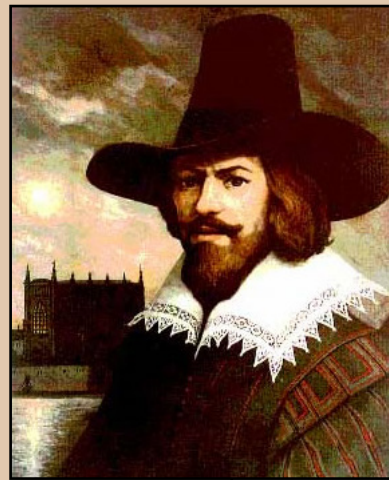
The plot was foiled when an anonymous letter was sent ten days prior to the convening of Parliament. Around midnight on the evening of November 4, a search of the tunnels below the House of Lords revealed a lone man guarding 36 barrels of gunpowder, enough to leave the House of Lords a smoldering pile of debris. This man, Guy Fawkes, was arrested and questioned. Upon hearing of Fawkes' arrest, most of the conspirators fled London. A few (including Robert Catesby) were killed,

but the rest were eventually captured and tried. On January 27, 1606, the eight surviving conspirators were convicted and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered.

To this day, despite the many confessions of the conspirators, some historians challenge the notion that the Gunpowder Plot was a Catholic-led attempt at regicide. Upon close examination of the historic documents, there are some obvious holes in the narrative presented by the government. Some believe that the entire plot was actually hatched by Sir Robert Cecil in a hope to give James I reason to distrust and persecute the Catholics in England. As with so many conspiracy theories, these is no way to unequivocally prove who was the actual mastermind behind the Gunpowder Plot.

To commemorate the thwarted plot, James ordered a giant bonfire in which an effigy of the Pope was burned. To this day, November 5 is

known as Guy Fawkes Day in England, and is celebrated with bonfires — though Guy Fawkes is now the figure burned in effigy.



Guy Fawkes

Drawn & Quartered

To be hanged, drawn and quartered was from 1351 a statutory penalty in England for men convicted of high treason. Convicts were fastened to a hurdle, or wooden panel, and drawn by horse to the place of execution, where they were hanged (almost to the point of death), emasculated, disemboweled, beheaded and quartered (chopped into four pieces). Their remains were often displayed in prominent places across the country, such as London Bridge, as a warning to other traitors.



Shakespeare in *Equivocation*

Several of Shakespeare’s greatest and most popular works are referenced in Bill Cain’s play. Here are some quick notes about the plays and their connections to *Equivocation*.

HAMLET

In *Hamlet*, the titular prince seeks revenge for the murder of his father at the hand of Claudius, his uncle turned step-father.



-The character of Polonius was based on William Cecil, the chief advisor to Elizabeth I for most of her reign, and father to Sir Robert Cecil. This is a cause of great tension between Shag and Cecil in the play.

-The name “Hamlet” is believed to be a reference to Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, who died at a young age shortly before he wrote the play.

EQUIVOCATION

n. “the use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth or to avoid committing oneself.”

Shakespeare uses “equivocation”—and its variations—over twice as many times in *Macbeth* as in all of his other plays combined.



KING LEAR

Seeking ease in his old age, Lear plans to divide his kingdom between his three daughters. When his favorite daughter displeases him, he rejects her and divides the land between his two other daughters. Their spiteful treatment of him sends him into madness.

-A selection from Act II: scene 4 is rehearsed in *Equivocation*.

MACBETH

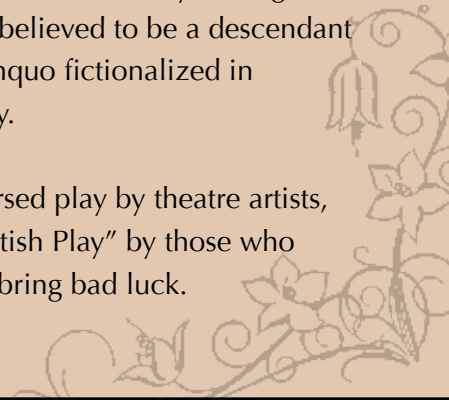
The once noble Macbeth — with the assistance and encouragement of his wife — resorts to murder to gain the throne of Scotland after three mysterious women tell him he is destined to be king.



-Much of *Equivocation* centers around (a fictional account of) the creation of *Macbeth*.

-When King James of Scotland ascended the throne of England following the death of Elizabeth I, he inspired a new interest in Scottish culture, lore, and history among the English. James is believed to be a descendant of the real life Banquo fictionalized in Shakespeare’s play.

-*Macbeth* has long been considered a cursed play by theatre artists, and is commonly referred to as “The Scottish Play” by those who believe even the mention of the title will bring bad luck.





Commentary & Criticism

"*Equivocation* is not only a slyly drawn picture of Shakespeare's London. It's also a cautionary tale for our time."

-Laura Hitchcock, *CurtainUp.com*

"Mr. Cain... brings a scholarly dedication and an impish humor to his portrait of history's most famous playwright at work. But *Equivocation* has more on its mind than playing what-if games with the theater's past. It also explores the moral obligation of artists to resist the manipulations of those in power. Parallels between then and now glare in neon, cutting through a fog as Mr. Cain depicts the brutal lengths to which the crown will go to investigate acts of supposed treason."

-Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*

"No need to equivocate: Bill Cain's *Equivocation*...is one of the most bracingly intelligent, sizzingly theatrical American plays in a decade. Stuffed...with themes, incidents and epigrams purporting to tell one version of William Shakespeare's midlife career crisis, it's an experience no serious theatergoer will want to miss. "

-Bob Verini, *Variety*

"Bill Cain has written a play that, to paraphrase the King's crafty sidekick [Cecil], attempts to be all things to all theater goers: political thriller, revisionist history play, ethical rumination, family drama, comic

spoof, play-within-a-play...Cain manages to juggle all these genres into an ingeniously witty yet sad and chilling drama."

-Elyse Sommer, *CurtainUp.com*

"There is an abundance of mystery, drama, intrigue and humor in Bill Cain's fascinating play *Equivocation*. ...*Equivocation* is a complex and intricate piece of drama...Cain's exploration of this historical event and the possible conspiracy around it are fascinating. He has crafted an excellent play that is part historical drama, part thriller but always thrilling..."

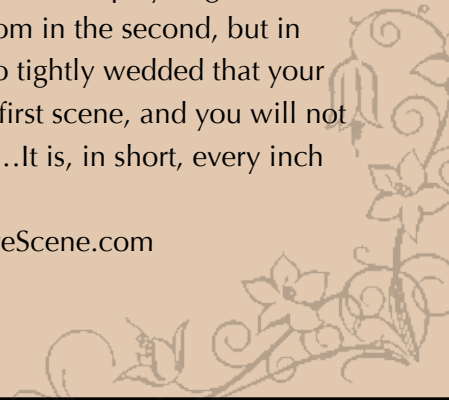
-Gil Benbrook, *TalkinBroadway.com*

"With so many unanswered questions about the Bard of Avon, here dubbed Will 'Shagspeare,' a play like this, which hypothesizes and ruminates over the man, was long overdue. We had *Shakespeare in Love* at the flicks, now we get Shakespeare in hot water with *Equivocation*... With portions of history, humor, sadness, and snippets of Shakespeare doled out by the playwright, there is, to borrow from a latter-day genius dramatist "something for everyone" in *Equivocation*."

-David Edward Hughes, *TalkinBroadway.com*

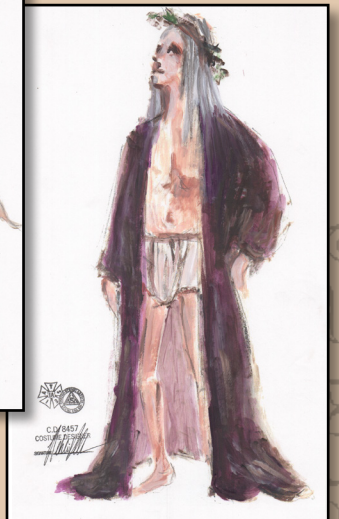
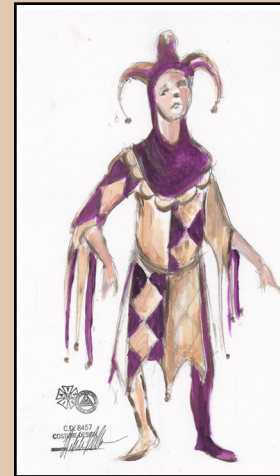
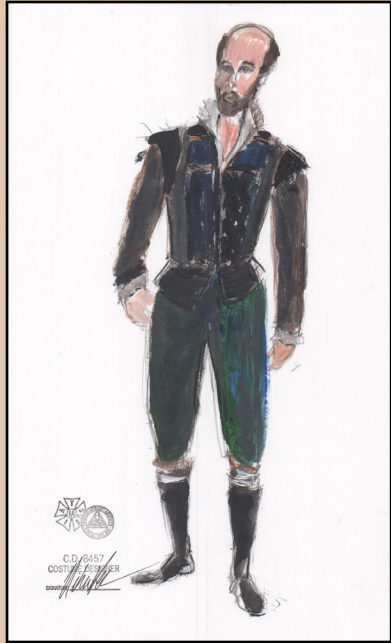
"[*Equivocation*] is... also a feel-good play... some entertainments insult your intelligence, but this is the opposite – a play which reminds you of the nobility, understanding, and grace which is your heritage, and the heritage of all human beings. A good play by a mature playwright will often show technique in the first act and wisdom in the second, but in *Equivocation* the wisdom and technique are so tightly wedded that your first gasp of recognition will come in the very first scene, and you will not stop surprising yourself for the rest of the play...It is, in short, every inch the prize-winning play that it is..."

-Tim Treanor, *DCTheatreScene.com*





In This Production



Above: Set design by Michael Schweikardt.
Others (from left): Costume designs for Shag, Cecil, Judith, James I,
The Fool and Lear by Nikki Delhomme.



Explore Online

Dive deeper into the history of the Gunpowder Plot with transcripts of letters, interrogations, and confessions archived on the Gunpowder Plot Society web site.

Gunpowder-Plot.org



Hear playwright Bill Cain discuss his thoughts on the play and “telling the truth in difficult times” in this video from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1rifwolxxc>



“THE GUNPOWDER PLOT: EXPLODING THE LEGEND”: this BBC program considers whether the plot could have succeeded if Guy Fawkes had not been caught. Interesting historical information and dramtizations. Plus, at around 0:52, you can see whether 36 barrels of gunpowder could have taken down the House of Lords.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zI9WMJX85Eg>





Sources & Further Reading

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