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The Ballad of an Undergraduate Theatre Major

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My peer professors, I you beseech
To hear my tale that may you teach
The value of the things we do
And th'effect on those we do them to.
Some years ago, three decades back,
A student bold withstood attack
And beat back old Seniority
In ord'ring her priorities.
Her tale, which may my colleagues irk,
Can teach us best to do our work;
So, listen as I bring alive,
"The Student and *Twelfth Night*, Act Five."

In the middle west, at college small,
A director thought he knew it all.
He picked a Shakespeare play to do;
But could not seem to work it through:
Beginning scenes he'd run and run —
But ending scenes did not get done.
The weeks of practice came and went
But, on Act Five, left not a dent.
With three days left, at evening late,
Twelfth Night was in a sorry state.
The actors, tired, with all-spent vim,
Before them saw a future dim.

A graduate student, tall and proud,
Arose and then addressed the crowd:

“My friends, our strength we now must test
And do what actors know is best.
Though the work exhaust and smart,
We have to suffer for our art.
Consider it a means to grow,
For working actors suffer so.
So what? we have to stay all night?
We have our art; and art makes right!
What matter if our spirits bleed?
We have a show which must proceed!”

Then murmurs in a tired way
Showed the speech had won the day.
With sleepy voices, steps not light,
The actors braced for hellish night,
As—phantom-like and half-alive—
They set about to block Act Five.
Then grew a voice from soft to shout:
An actress started blurting out.
She seemed less person than a mouse,
Quiv’ring in her servant’s blouse.
But rodents to a jolt react;
And she had had enough of tact:

“Damn you if I’ll stay all night!
I have three papers yet to write!
Call it youth or call it sass,
But I won’t fail my hist’ry class!
Nor reward, with time they rob,
Directors who can’t do their job!
He should have done as we all know
And blocked Act Five two weeks ago!
Now, it’s a problem—yes, I see—
But one for him, and not for me!
If you’re such fools to waste sweet time,
Then waste your own, but don’t waste mine!”

And, after all the fuss she made,
She walked right out; and no one stayed.
From this event, what can we learn?
From this event, what truths discern?
Her wrath retains the pow'r to wow,
An example still to students now.
So, as we get our plays rehears'd,
Let students put their classwork first.
Let's not then, with our own Act Fives,
Teach lessons that will ruin their lives.
For they will have their sorry days;
But let them be apart from plays.

The simplest truth we hate to say:
That few will ever act for pay.
The simplest truth we so deplore:
We matter — but else matters more.
So teach them well, but teach with love:
And never make the work so tough
That what we love will, in their eyes,
Become a horror to despise,
Or, even worse, some vicious god
That leaves them empty in the sod.
Now, gentle friends, take this to heart:
Be liberal with our liberal art.

*Remember, as we always should:
The stage, sans joy, is nothing good.*



David J. Eshelman is Professor of Communication at Arkansas Tech University, where he is also head of the Communication & Media Studies Department. He is founder and artistic director of the Arkansas Radio Theatre. He writes plays and creates short films for social media. His work has previously been published in *Liminalities*. This poem, an admonition to teachers and directors, is based on an incident from his own student days. Dr. Eshelman enjoys working with students of all backgrounds and interest levels.



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