Edward Bond wrote this programme note for the production of “Bingo: scenes of death and money” by the Chichester Festival Theatre in April 2010. The Festival Director refused to publish it. Without informing the author another note was commissioned and published. When the production transferred to the London Young Vic in February 2012 the programme had no note in it.

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When I wrote Bingo thirty years ago its argument was somewhat theoretical. It has since become eerily relevant. The great icon of Western culture signs a piece of paper for a wealthy banker called Combe. The consequences spread like ripples of iron-chains across the surface of a pool. Four hundred years later Combe has become so powerful he can gamble with our lives and corrupt our culture. When Shakespeare sold himself to Combe, he sold not only the people of Stratford. He sold us. What followed is more than a theatrical irony, it is fate, the fateful consequence of human actions: Combe now owns our theatre.

In Bingo Shakespeare performs a final act – as if in one vast tragic gesture he could prove the world is moral by turning the sky into his suicide note and making God the witness of his signature. In introducing the play I want to pay my respects to that gesture and the institution for which he wrote.

**Shakespeare, Civilization, Gossip and Death**

Gossip holds civilizations together. Its like a cool magma that seeps between and soaks into all the elements of a culture. It unites street-life and the needs of the home, the workshop and shopping arcade, media and high art, prisons, churches and academies, the complications of science, the chants of sports arenas, infant prattle, the adages of sages, crime and the high offices of state. All these things are the text of drama. And every day they must be reduced to gossip, so that they can be understood and exist side by side in the same world. In this way the most erudite and intellectual knowledge is filtered into daily life in sufficient strength to inform and change it. *Vox populi, vox dei*: the voice of the people is the voice of God.

This should be good news for theatre. It means that drama may combine chatter and high rhetoric in a way that makes the profoundest human experience and deepest meanings understandable within the audience’s creative intelligence. That is what theatre is for. Its been said that if God came down to earth he would go first not to church but to the theatre.

Not anymore. Our gossip is debased. It no longer springs from the people’s inventiveness. It is filtered down to us by television and the big screens, distorted by the media mobs, relentless advertising and compulsive consumerism. In simpler forms these things could be part of the good life. But today they are produced not to make life good but to make bankers rich -- not to meet our wants but to addict us to wanting what can be sold for the greatest profit. Every word we speak echoes with cash. The symptom of any drug addict is the neglect of social responsibility -- and everything in our society works like a drug. We begin to fumble through life in a chaotic haze of virtual reality.

The chaos is held together and given some shred of meaning by another product: the Cult of Celebrity. Celebrities are role models for success in the market. They stand for nothing but their own bank balances and that impoverishes the rest of us.

People want celebrities to live their lives for them so that they can share the excitement at a distance. But the trivial pronouncements, fake affairs, phoney bust-ups and pathetic breakdowns soon pall. People learn that celebrity life is hollower than their own. Its then that people start asking for suffering, for real pain – and the market provides it. It turns the Cult of Celebrity into the Cult of Celebrity Death. Without that our culture would fall apart. It has to stuff its emptiness with sawdust tears. And so death becomes the perfect consumer drug. This isn't new – ancient societies kept themselves alive by ritual sacrifice. But at least their victims gave their society blood – our dead celebs give us nothing but their emptiness. Its all they have to give.

Shakespeare was not a celeb. While alive he seems to have been known only to some small professional circles. In the play I treat him as one of his own characters. In truth I do not know how he died. In the play he dies thus: so that the world should bear one less stain.

Democracy and drama were created together at the same time to serve the same purpose. The state of a democracy depends on its drama, which is its collective self-consciousness and unconsciousness. If it uses its power properly, drama combines gossip and the highest rhetoric to make the mysteries of human existence less dark and our future more sure. And even now it could still do it. Its not yet handed over to the worst pressures of the market place. But instead more and more theatres become shop windows without even a shop behind them. They are enemies of democracy, part of the desolation from which our children face the dangers this century promises them.

If Shakespeare entered our theatre now he would commit suicide.