

ALAN CUMMING
BRINGS TO
SHAKESPEARE
THE LYRICISM
OF A GENUINE
SINGER, THE
SHARP EDGE
OF A WICKED
COMIC, AND
THE EMBODIED
INTELLIGENCE OF
A MAJOR ACTOR.

MICHAEL BOYD,
FORMER RSC
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



PRODUCED BY
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CUMMING

ALAN



THE HEAD THAT WEARS A CROWN

SPEECHES
FOR ROYAL MEN
BY WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE

Alan is one of the most extraordinary artists of his generation. His range as an actor is altogether remarkable, and his Shakespeare is illuminated by his incredible musicality. JOHN KANDER, COMPOSER

1. O for a Muse of fire (Chorus from *Henry V*)
2. Now is the winter of our discontent (*Richard III*)
3. You common cry of curs! (*Coriolanus*)
4. I have been studying how I may compare This prison (*Richard II*)
5. Look here, upon this picture (*Hamlet*)
6. Mad world! mad kings! mad composition! (Bastard from *King John*)
7. If it were done when 'tis done (*Macbeth*)
8. Go call the Earls of Surrey and of Warwick; (Henry IV from *Henry IV Part 2*)
9. Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; (*Henry V*)
10. To be, or not to be: that is the question; (*Hamlet*)
11. What must the king do now? (*Richard II*)
12. Methinks I am a prophet new inspired (John of Gaunt from *Richard II*)
13. Why, lords, what wrongs are these! (Saturninus from *Titus Andronicus*)
14. O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, (*Hamlet*)
15. Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile, (Duke Senior from *As You Like It*)
16. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, (*Macbeth*)
17. What's he that wishes so? (*Henry V*)
18. Hear, Nature, hear! (*King Lear*)
19. How all occasions do inform against me, (*Hamlet*)
20. Let me speak, sir, (Cranmer from *Henry VIII*)
21. If music be the food of love, play on; (Duke Orsino from *Twelfth Night*)
22. Now my charms are all o'erthrown, (Prospero from *The Tempest*)

A JOURNEY OF STORY

No wonder this recording by Alan Cumming sounds simply delicious, he's played nearly half the roles and has his eyes on the other half. And quite rightly, he points out that nothing ought get in his way of playing Shakespeare's entire canon, after taking on the complete cast list of *Macbeth*. After all, they were all written to be played by men, regardless of the characters' sex, and it really does come down to a question of the talent and skill of the actor, a question which Cumming has again answered in this transcendent rendition of speeches for the Bard's most royal of Royal.

I've heard nearly all of these speeches (included on the album are thankfully both likely and unlikely selections) spoken on England's finest Shakespearean stages; yet here Cumming's spoken performances reveal something deeper in neurosis, self-loathing and hating, paranoia and pathology; something that hits you instantly, and without question, theatrically. But he's not on the stage, he's in the recording studio. I'm not in an auditorium, I'm listening to this on my MacBook. How is it possible that what I'm hearing is clearer, less distracted and tangled up than if it were on the stage? These renditions are free of all sets and costumes that can be cumbersome in the theatre,

and instead, my imagination and my senses are released to float pleasurably with him and characters of great royal disparity.

Cumming's interpretations here carry his trademarks: unique, unapologetic and exhilarating. Characters are immediately recognizable as the fruits of an actor's preparation and process as if he were preparing to play the character on stage or screen. Cumming has distilled entire roles and stories into his voice, gloriously, without losing a skerrick of the full actor. You can feel his entire body and being devoted totally and utterly to the story, character and work; even when he breathes in at the end of a phrase, such inhaling designed only to allow him to physically continue, the incoming breath is

loaded with meaning so rich and transportative. He wastes nothing and uses everything.

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Alan Cumming's ability to place his voice dynamically; his timbre, rhythm, pitch, accents, everything, render Alan Cumming one of the greatest chameleons of Shakespeare's words

and worlds. His voice and this album take you on a journey of story, and that's the whole point of Shakespeare.

ADAM SPREADBURY-MAHER

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR—KING'S HEAD THEATRE

RECORDED AND CO-PRODUCED BY MEGAN HENNINGER MASTERED BY PETER FITZGERALD + MEGAN HENNINGER

ALL PHOTOS OF MR. CUMMING BY CHARLES WENZELBERG ART DIRECTION BY MARGOT FRANKEL

RECORDED JANUARY 17, 2013 AT SOUND ASSOCIATE STUDIO VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO SAM MORGAN + MATTAN MERIDOR

THE COMPLETE TEXT OF THESE SPEECHES IS AVAILABLE AT WWW.GPRECORDS.COM

hammer it out.” His Richard II is simply sublime.

Experiencing great art, particularly Shakespeare, allows us to see, hear, feel, experience different parts of the human condition. Delving into the human condition can and should help us be better people. Being better people makes the world a better place to be. As silly as it may sound, experiencing Shakespeare helps change the world. Alan Cumming, deftly delivering some of the greatest speeches ever written, can get you a glimpse into that magic, into the transformative power of great art. Until I can get Alan to come do Shakespeare in repertory in front of live audiences in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, this project is the next best thing.

JIM WARREN, CO-FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,
AMERICAN SHAKESPEARE CENTER



THE GREATEST MYSTERY

Why is it that in these days of tumbling dictatorships and struggling new democracies, both trying to cushion their fall by crushing human rights, whose history unfolds before our eyes through Reality TV, blogs and Instagram, are we still drawn to Shakespeare's kings and princes? How is it that while our leaders are meticulously examined under society's amorous looking glass, every word analyzed, every gesture ridiculed and every action echoed in posts, and tweets, and memes, we still turn to those magnificent noble villains?

It cannot be just the lack of heroes, the lack of role models, for Richard III, or King John or Macbeth are anything but paradigms of virtue. Perhaps, it's a way of escaping the all-encompassing effect of the media—where villains and saints, and kings and beggars are all flattened and con-

densed into an almost tasteless, senseless vision, proving to ourselves that all the world's not a screen, but still a stage. And that in this world, in Shakespeare, we have real characters: complex, flawed, multi-faceted, and most importantly, humane. If one quality stands out in this astonishing recording, it is the vast variety of human expression, emotions, states of mind explored and manifested by Alan Cumming. His unparalleled ability to encompass the “great globe itself, yeah all which it inherit,” switching from character to character, is what makes this recording “set our indulgences free.”

Cumming proves to us again and again, that human nature, as wonderfully captured by William Shakespeare, is and always will be the greatest mystery, and the only one worth depicting.

DAN MERIDOR, POLITICIAN

ALAN CUMMING trained at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and his first professional engagement was as Malcolm in *Macbeth* at Glasgow's Tron Theatre, directed by Michael Boyd.

He spent a season with the RSC in Stratford and the Barbican before storming the West End in 1993 with his career-defining Hamlet for the English Touring Theatre, for which he won the Theatre Management Association Best Actor award and was nominated for the Richard Burton Award at that year's Shakespeare Globe Awards. Soon after he played Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Royal National Theatre Studio.

He played Saturninus in *Titus*, Julie Taymor's scorching film adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, opposite Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange, and later reunited with Taymor to play Sebastian to Helen Mirren's Prospera in *The Tempest*.

His most startling Shakespearian collaboration was the National Theatre of Scotland's *Macbeth* in which he played all the roles in a chilling and ground-breaking multi-media interpretation set in a psychiatric unit. *Macbeth* opened to huge critical acclaim at the Glasgow Tramway in 2012, followed by a brief run at the Lincoln Center in NYC. The production opened on Broadway in April 2013.

His previous Broadway appearances were as his sensational EmCee in *Cabaret* (his Broadway debut for which he received the Tony and five other awards), *Design For Living* and in *The Threepenny Opera*. Off-Broadway he played Trigorin in *The Seagull* opposite Dianne Wiest and the Pope in Jean Genet's *Elle*, which he also adapted. In London recent works includes *The Bacchae* for the National Theatre of Scotland and Martin Sherman's *Bent*. He previously won an Olivier award for his *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* at the National Theatre (which he also adapted) and Olivier nominations for *La Bete*, *Cabaret* and *The*

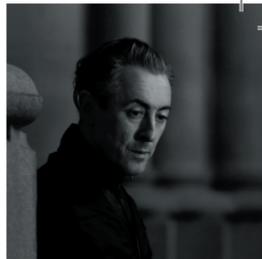
Conquest of the South Pole at the Royal Court.

His films include *Eyes Wide Shut*, *X2: X Men United*, the *Spy Kids* trilogy, *Sweet Land* (for which he won an Independent Spirit Award), *The Anniversary Party* (which he co-wrote, produced and directed with Jennifer Jason Leigh and won them a National Board of Review award and two Independent Spirit nominations) *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Emma*, *Goldeneye*, *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* and most recently *Any Day Now* for which he received a plethora of Best Actor awards on the film festival circuit.

On TV he is best known for *The Good Wife*, for which he has received Emmy, SAG, Satellite and Critics Choice award nominations. Other US TV work includes *Tin Man*, the movies *Reefer Madness*, *Annie*, *The Goodbye Girl* and guest roles in *Sex and the City*, *Frasier*, *The L Word* and *Web Therapy*. On British TV he most recently hosted *Urban Secrets* and the documentary *The Real Cabaret*, as well as playing a transvestite in Martina Cole's *The Runaway*. He won a British Comedy Award for the TV film *Bernard and the Genie*, and also co-wrote with Forbes Mason the cult BBC sitcom *The High Life*.

Cumming has also written a novel, *Tommy's Tale*, as well as articles for *Newsweek*, *Harpers Bazaar*, *Interview*, *Modern Painters* and *Black Book*, and contributions and introductions to many books. He has also released an album, *I Bought A Blue Car Today*, and had an exhibition of his photography, *Alan Cumming Snaps!*

He has received many awards for his humanitarian work and political activism, particularly in the field of LGBT equality, and for this and his contribution to the arts he was made an OBE in 2009.



THE FIRST SHAKESPEARE PLAY

I ever read was *Macbeth*, when my high school class studied it. My older brother had told me how exciting it was, and when it was my turn to read it I was truly mesmerized by its combination of the supernatural, human frailty and...Scotland!

I truly couldn't believe that Shakespeare was writing, all those years before, about places that I

knew and even visited regularly. I was rather disappointed to discover that not all his plays were set in my back yard! But that initial personal connection I felt as a young boy has never left me.

I see so much in every Shakespeare play, even every Shakespeare speech that speaks to me, and I know I am not alone. I have never ceased to be amazed at his capacity to capture such truth and pain and joy whilst at the same time juggling limitless plot lines, idioms and the grandest and most complicated of ideas. Each time I come back to perform one of his plays or sonnets or make a recording like this one, I always find something so personal and truthful that I can relate to as an actor, and more importantly as a man.

Shakespeare has opened my eyes, expanded my horizons, reminded me I am not the first to fail and that my triumphs are only so if I understand how to use for the best what they bring me. He has seen me through my youth to my manhood, and to the prime of my life. I really don't think I could have done it without him.

I really enjoy performing Shakespeare in my own voice. I think the earthiness, rawness and expressiveness of a Scottish accent is the perfect complement to the range of ideas and tones and music of Shakespeare. So for all of the non-English specific characters on this recording I have used my natural accent, and for the others my fabricated Sassenach one.



THE MATURE MAN AND ARTIST

Shakespearean. How delightful it is to encounter Cumming, the mature man and artist, as he demonstrates his range in this gallery of Shakespeare royals. Like the EmCee we have a Henry V and a Prospero who directly address the audience, asking us to behold the ephemeral majesty of theater, those fleeting expe-

No one who saw him can forget Alan Cumming as the elfin, androgynous EmCee in the Sam Mendes production of *Cabaret*. So layered and theatrical was his turn as the show's official greeter and guide that one is tempted to say it was

periences that allow us to sit together and examine what it means to be human in this vast imperfect universe.

Cumming is meticulous in his delineation of Richard III—whose sneering condemnation of the world gives way to pure self-pity when he considers his own pain, the indignity of his deformity seeming to him to justify, even to demand, causing chaos and grief for others. Using his native Scottish lilt, Cumming gives us a masterful Macbeth, a man whose punishment for losing his humanity is horrific unassuageable boredom. Then there is Hamlet, who vibrates with awareness, whether asking “what is a man?” or the ultimate question of existence—“to be or not to be.” In this recording we encounter a vocal performance so textured we can close our eyes and see a parade of Shakespeare's indecipherable characters, see them whole in their naked pain and glory. LAURIE WINER, CRITIC AND WRITER

A THOUSAND THOUSAND BLESSINGS

This collection takes us on a thrilling ride with some of Shakespeare's most famous characters and speeches. Bad boys, heroes, kings, and renegades. Love-sick dukes and homicidal hunchbacks. Alan puts us inside Hamlet's doubts and bloody thoughts; he reveals Macbeth's vaulting ambition and ultimate weariness of never-ending tomorrows; and he transports us into the middle of battle as King Henry V, urging us to follow him unto the breach once more.

But this project is so much more than Shakespeare's greatest hits. Some of my favorite moments are when Alan goes further off the beaten path. He gives us Cranmer (from Shakespeare and Fletcher's

Henry VIII) who celebrates “the royal infant” Elizabeth, who grows up to be Shakespeare's mighty queen: “though in her cradle, yet now promises upon this land a thousand thousand blessings, which time shall bring to ripeness.” He gives us a piece from *As You Like It* in which the exiled Duke

Bad boys, heroes, kings, and renegades. Love-sick dukes and homicidal hunchbacks.

Senior inspires his followers to make the Forest of Arden their Utopia by finding “tongues in trees, books in these running brooks, sermons in stones,

and good in everything.” Alan's nuanced performance finds the subtle double-back humor when Richard “fails” to compare his prison to the world, “I cannot do it. Yet I'll (continued on next page)

