

***In the Shadow of the Globe...* Review by Jim Boring**
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First, Michelle Cameron has written a small classic that will be around for a long time. *In the Shadow of the Globe* is an imagining of lives and events connected with the founding of The Globe Theatre made famous by the plays of William Shakespeare. Cameron uses a hybrid form that borrows from antique playbills to guide the narrative and as a way to keep the reader located relative to the unfolding events. But that clever and very useful structural device pales next to the accessible beauty of the poetry she has written.

The author spent several years researching the actors of the Globe, and many of the events described in the book are based on the history of the theater. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey has already made the book their "Winter Book Selection," and many other theaters and festivals are ordering it for its theatrical potential. The mix of fact and fiction brings fresh life to an endlessly fascinating subject for those who love literature, poetry, theatre or the keen observation of human nature in all its tattered glory.

Cameron has done some magic here-- the language and the characters themselves are very much a part of their time but, somehow, without a flutter of artifice, also a part of ours. A spare lyricism (a kind of Gregorian Chant) pulls the reader into this vivid dream. Here is Mary Burbage, daughter of the founder of the Globe theater, describing her father and events from her early childhood ("My Father, Dreamer, Builder"):

my baby days:
all hammer song
and walking shod--

too easy to stumble
over splintering beams,
trip on mislaid tools,

and yet, there was magic:
shells of buildings
rising, shaped
by my father's hand,

his voice throaty, deep,
drama in his movement,
in his commands, his excuses,

a man too used
to woo audiences
to love easily,

every inch of him
built for applause.

And there is a kind of choreography going on that imperceptibly provides a cadence, a rhythm, a quality akin to dance to the movement from scene to scene, event to event, stanza to stanza. Here Mary describes her first encounter with Shakespeare ("Shakespeare Seeks a Position").

Thinking himself concealed
by the great oak,
he spit in his hand,
smoothed back his hair,
tugged at his doublet,
twisting it, to lie flat,

made himself walk up
the smooth stone to the door,
slipped off,
stepped back,

and knocked.

These characters are alive; they are plausible-- they operate under recognizable and understandable constraints of social situation, profession, domestic conditions and their own personal strengths and weaknesses. The reader understands what they are up against. Here is Will Kempe, the fat clown of the Globe, leaving the company after one too many disputes with Shakespeare ("Leavetaking"):

In truth, I say farewell
with a light heart!
I will not miss early
mornings, boys tugging
my sleeves, begging
another lesson gamboling,
juggling, tumbling, prancing about.
nor being pricked by dresser's needle,
Prosed to by bookman,
enduring rehearsals,
where Burbage drops his cues,
Heminge struts about, fat peacock,
Will Shakerag moans the brutal misuse
of his precious turds of prose.

God, 'tis a wonder
I endured it all this time!

This is more than a tale of unrequited love. But it is also that, a story of longing fitfully expressed, rarely fulfilled and sustained through enough vicissitude to daunt the stoutest spirit ("Complaints").

When my Dark Lady loved me,
I could not stop the flow
of sonnets-- I thought
they'd sweep us up,
their sway and power rich enough
to make us equal,

but she, careless, stuffed them
like so much stained lace
and stray pearl beads
into her casket of memories,

Something to pull out
on a rainy day,
instead of riding to hounds.

This strong medicine may be sweetened with romantic yearnings and idealizations, but each of the major female characters and Will Shakespeare himself also look on their own actions and longings with a very practical eye. Here Shakespeare reflects on the disparity between his wife's ambitions and his own ("Avon Haystacks, Remembered"):

Anne's dreams, to spite mine,
were more domestic,
set within a farm, a family,
a world secure and closed--

and though she admired
my thrust of ambition,
I've learned her murmurs
after love were a spider web
flattering the trapped insect,
its gaze of total attention

to every furry limb.

These characters know their place and work to maximize the hand they have been dealt without overplaying it. These are people who live in a real world. That world is filled with camaraderie, love, jealousy, sniping, unselfishness, grasping, and even philosophical and managerial differences about the purpose of the great conglomerate art of the stage. A profound, thought-provoking, and emotionally satisfying tale.