

SHAKESPEARE AND THE HILLBILLIES

A One-Act Comedy Play

by
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SHAKESPEARE AND THE HILLBILLIES

by
Marcia H. Marsh

SCENE 1

TIME: The present

SETTING: The main room of the MURFREE cabin in the mountains of Tennessee

AT RISE: *Slow banjo music plays as MAPLE ANN and ZENOBIA enter from wings right and left. They sit on rocking chairs and begin shelling beans as lights dim and music fades.*

MAPLE ANN: Mornin', Zenobia.

ZENOBIA: Mornin', Maple Ann.

MAPLE ANN: What ya' shelling over thar?

ZENOBIA: My green beans. Spent four hours in the garden yestiddy. Gonna' taste mighty good tonight.

MAPLE ANN: Your green beans are the best in three counties. Lila Belle's beans over in Pigeon Forge can't touch the taste of yours.

ZENOBIA: Why, thank you. That's mighty nice of you to say.

MAPLE ANN: What do ya' hear about Granny Murfree these days?

ZENOBIA: She ain't faring too well, Maple Ann. Abner told me yestiddy that she's just about on her deathbed.

MAPLE ANN: Poor old soul. It's not gonna' be the same in these mountains when Granny Murfree passes on.

ZENOBIA: No, it ain't. Granny Murfree jest about raised all of us in these hills. When I was five years old, she nursed me back from the measles. My ma couldn't nurse me 'cause she was sicker than me.

MAPLE ANN: When I was ten, Granny Murfree cured me from the worst case of poison ivy. She could mix up medicine better than any book-learned doctor.

ZENOBIA: That's a fact. I don't know what we are gonna' do without Granny Murfree. These mountains might jest sink into the ground when she passes on to the big cabbage patch in the sky.

MAPLE ANN: That's a fact. I hate to think of it. Have you heard what Granny's dying wish is fer her family?

ZENOBIA: Her dyin' wish? No, I haven't heard tell of it.

MAPLE ANN: Lily May Crumpepp stopped by yestiddy and told me all about it. It seems that for all these years, Granny Murfree has wanted a university education for her family. She had her heart set on her kinfolk getting some learning in literature, particularly Shakespeare.

ZENOBIA: Why, bless my drawers! Granny wants to citify her family?

MAPLE ANN: Not really citify them.....just see them get some culture before she dies.

ZENOBIA: But university learnin'? We don't have anything in common with those high-falutin bookworms! Why would Granny want her family to get that higher education?

MAPLE ANN: It seems that Granny has wanted some culture in her family for years.

ZENOBIA: I never heard her mention it.

MAPLE ANN: Neither have I. It must have been a secret dream of hers.....to see them educated before she dies.

ZENOBIA: So what are they gonna' do? Go down in the valley and sign up at that university down thar?

MAPLE ANN: No. Lily May said that when Granny made this request on her death bed, Pa Murfree asked her exactly what she wanted him to do. Granny told him to bring a professor from the university to teach the family how to speak Shakespeare.

ZENOBIA: (*scratching head*) Shakespeare? Who IS that? Wait a minute! Warn't he that guy who.....

MAPLE ANN: Yes 'um! He's that guy from across the ocean who's been dead fer all these hundreds of years. Granny's dying wish is to hear her family speak Shakespeare before she departs for the promised land.

ZENOBIA: Speak Shakespeare? That's like learning a foreign language! Those Murfrees ain't smart enough to learn that Shakespeare talk! Granny ain't gonna' get her dying wish.

MAPLE ANN: That's the same thing I said to Lily May. But what can Pa Murfree say to his mother's dying wish? He's got to do it. Lily May told me that he left early this morning to get one of those university professors to come on up this mountain and teach the Murfrees some Shakespeare! Can you believe it?

ZENOBIA: I'm plumb mystified by it, Maple Ann. That's the strangest dying wish I've ever heard a body make. The Murfrees learning Shakespeare before Granny passes on? I reckon there would be more of a chance to see a rattlesnake become friends with a raccoon!

MAPLE ANN: Well, keep your ears open, Zenobia. I'll give you a hollar if I hear that Pa Murfree gits one of those university men up on this mountain. It'll be the talk of the entire Smokey Mountains if he does!

ZENOBIA: Let me grab these beans and skedaddle! I reckon I got to tell my sister about this. I can't git over it! Granny Murfree's dying wish is Shakespeare? Nobody in these parts knows who he is!

MAPLE ANN: Well, the Murfree clan is about to find out who he is, I reckon. Give me a hollar, Zenobia. See you soon!
(They grab pots and exit wings right and left as country music plays.)

SCENE 2

(Curtains open to show interior room of MURFREE cabin. MA MURFREE, BILLIE JEAN and AUNT MARMALADE are doing chores as music fades.)

MA MURFREE: Billie Jean, did you skin that rabbit fer dinner? If yer Pa brings home a teacher from the university, we're gonna' have to serve up somethin' real special to impress him.

BILLIE JEAN: Yes, Ma, I skinned the rabbit. He's lyin' in the pot in the back room.

AUNT MARAMALDE: I'll cook up my special sauce to go with that rabbit. If that don't impress the university man, nothin' will.

BILLIE JEAN: Now, Aunt Marmalade, how do you know that Pa is bringing home a university MAN? It may be a university WOMAN. Nowadays there are as many womenfolk teaching at the university as menfolk.

AUNT MARAMALDE: I'm aware of that, Billie Jean. I may not have been down to the valley many times in my life, but ever since your Ma and Pa got this hyar telly-vision and VCR, I've been watching how women are moving into all kinds of professions and jobs. I'm sure thar are lots of intellectual women at that college down in the valley these days.

BILLIE JEAN: Soon as I can get my high school education, I'm a- thinkin' I might go to that university myself.

MA: Oh, is that so? And how are you going to get the money to do that?

BILLIE JEAN: Well, maybe Granny is leaving me some money in her will.

MA: I wouldn't count on that, Billie Jean. The only thing Granny is leaving us is her nine chickens, one ugly pig, and her rocking chair. You know Granny doesn't have any money to leave you.

BILLIE JEAN: Ya' never know. Maybe she's been stashing some cash in her mattress all these years.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Maybe so. Those chickens of Granny's always laid lots of nice eggs that she took to market. Maybe she struck it rich selling chicken eggs.

MA: Thar you go agin, Marmalade, dreaming up fancy ideas that could never happen.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Nothin' wrong with a little healthy dreamin', I always say.

MA: Well, speakin' of dreamin', where's Magnolia Sue? That child would daydream her whole life away if she had the chance.

BILLIE JEAN: She went down to the creek to catch tadpoles with Ben Bob.

MA: Catch tadpoles? That's not helping with dinner! Those two varmints know we can't eat tadpoles!

BILLIE JEAN: Aw, Ma, they're jest having a little fun while Pa's gone down to the valley.

MA: I know your Pa feels that he has to do this, but honestly, what in tarnation was Granny thinkin' of making this last request? Thar she lies in the next room, breathin' her last few breaths at the ripe old age of 98. And what does she think of as her deepest disappointment in life? That her family ain't properly book-learned! That her family has never learned to talk Shakespeare! Why in heaven's name would she make a request like that?

AUNT MARAMALDE: Now, settle down, Ma. Don't start with your rantin' and ravin'! Billie Jean doesn't need to hear you stompin' on Granny's character!

MA: She's our mother-in-law, Marmalade, and I have showed absolute respect for her all these years. But in all my born days, I've never heard of someone begging for the words of William Shakespeare in her last hours on this earth.

BILLIE JEAN: Tell me agin, Ma. Who is this Shakespeare fellow that Granny's all fired up about?

MA: He's a dead guy that wrote a passel of plays and poems that have been read and performed for hundreds of years.

BILLIE JEAN: And he wasn't from around these parts, Aunt Marmalade?

AUNT MARAMALDE: No, child. He was from the country of England. You know, a country way across that big ocean called the Atlantic.

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, yeah! I remember seeing that ocean on the map at school. And I think I remember seeing the country of England on that same map.

MA: Well, good, child. It gives me a great deal of joy to know you're learnin' so much at our mountain school. Maybe you COULD make it into that university someday.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Maybe you could, Billie Jean. Now, Ma, jest keep this in mind: Someday when YOU are on your deathbed, you may be making some crazy request that you have YOUR heart set on. Jest try to keep an open mind where Granny is concerned.

MA: May the good Lord strike me with a bolt of lightning, Marmalade, if I ever make such an outlandish, crazy.....

(SHE is cut off as BEN BOB and MAGNOLIA SUE enter through the door, upstage center. They are carrying buckets and fishing gear.)

MAGNOLIA SUE: Looky-here, Ma. I done caught me fifty-three tadpoles and they're right hyar in this bucket!

BEN BOB: *(holding up snake)* And I done caught me a big water moccasin! Can it sleep in my bed tonight?

MA: Gracious sakes, alive, Ben Bob! You know water moccasins are poisonous! Git that critter out of hyar right now!

BEN BOB: But, Ma! It's a real purty one!

AUNT MARAMALDE: There's no sech thing as a PURTY water moccasin, Ben Bob! Now do as your Ma tells ya' and git rid of it!

BEN BOB: Aw, Ma, can I keep it in my room if I promise to keep it in a glass jar?

MA: Boy, you know you share a room with yer cousin Ricky Roy and he hates snakes!

BEN BOB: But he'll like this one, Ma. It's a real purty one!

BILLIE JEAN: Don't you have ears, stupid? Ma said to take it outside and let it go!

MAGNOLIA SUE: Aunt Marmalade, looky hyar at my tadpoles! I caught 'em all by myself!

AUNT MARAMALDE: They're real nice, Magnolia Sue. But where are you goin' to keep all those critters?

BEN BOB: You ain't gonna' let her keep those tadpoles and make me git rid of my snake, are ya', Ma? That ain't fair!

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, shut up, Ben Bob! You're sech a cry-baby!

MA: Now, hesh up, chillun! I don't have time fer yer fussin'! We have company coming any minute.

MAGNOLIA SUE: Company? Who's a -comin'?

BEN BOB: We could show 'em this purty snake, Ma. Don't make me set it loose!

MA: Now I said to hesh up, chillun! Your pa has gone down to the valley to bring back a university man for your Granny's dying wish. You know what Granny's been asking fer these last few days.

MAGNOLIA SUE: Oh, yeah. I remember. She wants us to get educated.

BEN BOB: Yeah. Granny wants us to learn Shakespeare to make us all cultured. I don't want to learn it, though. I want to stay outside by the creek.

BILLIE JEAN: Well, that's jest too bad, Ben Bob. You got to do what Granny wants. It's her dyin' wish.

MAGNOLIA SUE: Then what do you want us to do, Ma? Go wash up?

BEN BOB: I don't want to wash up. I want to play with this hyar snake.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Now, listen up, you chillun. Your Pa will be arriving any minute. You got to make yourself look presentable. Go wash up and come back.

BEN BOB: But, Aunt Marmalade, I took a bath last Saturday night. And this is Thursday. Why do I have to take another one so soon?

BILLIE JEAN: Because you smell like a pole cat.

BEN BOB: At least I don't look like one! (**points at BILLIE JEAN**)

BILLIE JEAN: (**moving toward BEN BOB**) You jest better shut your mouth, Ben Bob! Not only are you the smelliest varmint I've ever known, but you...

BEN BOB: I take a bath every Saturday night, Billie Jean. You take one every OTHER Saturday night, which means you smell a lot worse than I do!

MA: Hesh up, you two! You're gonna' wake Granny and then we'll all be in....

GRANNY: (**yelling, from offstage left**) That's exactly right, Ma! Those two varmints are gonna' wake me up fer sure. What's all that hullabaloo goin' on out thar? Don't you have any respect fer yer elder, Billie Jean and Ben Bob?

BILLIE JEAN: (**remorseful**) Oh, Granny. We're sorry. We didn't mean to wake you from yer nap.

BEN BOB: (**to offstage left**) Sorry, Granny. You know how riled up Billie Jean gets me. She makes me plumb crazy.

GRANNY: (**offstage left**) Well, somebody git in hyar and push me out thar. I'm awake now. I might as well be sociable.

MA: Magnolia Sue, go get your Granny and bring her in here. And be gentle!

MAGNOLIA SUE: (**rushing offstage left**) Yes'm. Right away!

AUNT MARAMALDE: Now looky at what you two have gone and done. You woke your Granny from her nap which means she'll be in a terrible mood. Worse than usual.

BILLIE JEAN: Aw, Aunt Marmalade, I already said I was sorry. Besides, Granny will have to be getting up any time now to take her medicine.

BEN BOB: Well, you started the fight, Billie Jean. So it's your fault that things got so loud.

BILLIE JEAN: Quit your whining, Ben Bob. Not only do you stink, but you're a cry-baby. I pity the woman who ends up with you.

MA: Now don't start again, you two. I have a mind to put you in separate cages out back like wild raccoons.

GRANNY: (**being pushed onstage in a wheelchair by MAGNOLIA SUE**) That sounds like a good idea to me, Ma. Put 'em in cages, and that will shut 'em up!

AUNT MARAMALDE: (**fake sweet voice**) Well, how are you feeling, Granny? Did you get a good sleep?

MA: (**sugary sweet voice**) You're lookin' mighty fine this afternoon, Granny.

GRANNY: Oh, quit your lyin', women. I know how bad I look. But that's okay. I'm 98 years old and I haven't been to a beauty shop in a year. I reckon I could use a glamour makeover right now.

MAGNOLIA SUE: Oh, I could give you a makeover, Granny. I read about how to do one in a magazine.

GRANNY: How many gallons of miracle face cream would you need, Magnolia? Why don't you jest save your money for the picture show down in the valley?

BEN BOB: Aw, you don't need no glamour makeover, Granny. What you need isa good swim in the creek!

GRANNY: That sounds good to me, Ben Bob, but I'm afraid I'd sink to the bottom.

BILLIE JEAN: Aw, Granny, you don't want to go swimmin' in the creek. Why don't you let me cook you up some caterpillar pie?

GRANNY: Last time you made that pie, Billie Jean, I saw visions of angels coming down from the clouds to take me home.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Now, Granny, you've been talking about those angels for six months. You see them every time you eat!

MA: **(moving to GRANNY and pushing her)** Granny, let me roll you over hyar where you can jest relax and have a nice conversation with everybody.

BILLIE JEAN: Pa ought to be home any minute, Granny, with that special request you've been making.

BEN BOB: Yeah, Granny. You're finally gonna' get what you've been wanting fer so long.

MAGNOLIA SUE: It's the strangest request anyone in this family has ever made, Granny, but because we all love you so much, Pa left this morning to make it happen.

GRANNY: So yer Pa finally saw fit to oblige his own mother's last request, did he? Well, bless my drawers. The tears are coming to my eyes.

MA: Well, Granny, I hope you appreciate what yer son is doing fer you. Pa was supposed to hunt opossum today, but he gave that up to go huntin' fer a university man instead.

AUNT MARAMALDE: That's the truth, Granny. He's thinkin' of yer dyin' wish.

GRANNY: Well, I don't happen to see a pefesser anywhere near. I can't get my wish until we have one right hyar in our cabin teaching us. Until I see a real, live pefesser, I don't reckon I can thank Pa fer the favor.

BEN BOB: Why ya' want to go asking fer something like that, Granny? We don't need to know any of that Shakespeare stuff. We've been doing jest fine without him all these years.

MAGNOLIA SUE: That's right, Granny. Why ya' want us to learn that junk? That Shakespeare guy's been dead fer nearly four hundred years. Why would we want to learn about a dead guy fer?

GRANNY: You jest answered your own question, Magnolia Sue. You need some culture, some education. If you knew about Shakespeare, you wouldn't be wonderin' why you need to know about him. You'd understand why.

BILLIE JEAN: Magnolia Sue and Ben Bob are a little too stupid to understand why you want them to git some culture and education, Granny. But I understand what you're doing, and I have a mind to go to that university someday myself.

BEN BOB: Aw, sure, Billie Jean. Thar's no way in cotton-pickin' heaven that those university people would let the likes of you come through their gates. You say that Magnolia Sue and me are stupid? Well, we learned everything we know from YOU!

BILLIE JEAN: Aw, shut up, Ben Bob! You're the stupidest boy that's ever lived on the mountain and everybody says it. Why, you don't even know who the President of the United States is.

BEN BOB: Who needs to know that? The President ain't never come to our cabin fer dinner, so why do I need to know him?

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, you're stupider than a dead crawfish, Ben Bob, and you haven't even made it to second grade in school. You're the oldest boy in the first grade!

BEN BOB: Jest shut your trap, Billie Jean. You think you're so fine and dandy. You think you could fit in with those college smarties? They'd know the first day what a hick you are.

BILLIE JEAN: **(balling up fist)** I'm not a hick! You'd better get ready for a pop in the kisser, Ben Bob, although you're too dumb to know what's gonna' hit ya'!

BEN BOB: Come on and try it, Billie Jean! Jest come on and give it to me!

(BILLIE JEAN and BEN BOB move toward each other for a fight as MA, AUNT MARMALADE, GRANNY and MAGNOLIA SUE yell at them to stop. UNCLE ZEKE and RICKY ROY enter through upstage center door, carrying gun and dead animals.)

ZEKE: What's going on in hyar? I could hear the yellin' from a mile down the road.

RICKY ROY: Oh, boy! It's another fight between Billie Jean and Ben Bob! I reckon we wouldn't want to miss this hullabaloo!

MA: Ben Bob and Billie Jean, I said stop it! Either mind your manners or I'll take you both out back and tan your hides real good!

GRANNY: **(laughing)** You two remind me of myself and my brother Jasper Lee. We fought like coyotes and wolves growing up. Jasper Lee could make me madder than a hungry grizzly bear!

AUNT MARAMALDE: Zeke, honey, help us out here. You and Ricky Roy need to settle those young 'uns down!

ZEKE: All I can say is that you two better settle down before your Pa gits in hyar. He's coming up the road with four strange lookin' city slickers.

BILLIE JEAN: Pa's comin' now? You mean, he's home?

RICKY ROY: That's right. He'll be comin' through that door any minute.

MA: Well, gracious sakes alive! Everybody, tidy up! Look your best! Ben Bob, take that snake out back and let him loose in the woods. **(BEN BOB stuffs snake in pocket of overalls.)** Magnolia Sue, bresh your hair. Billie Jean, go wash yer face!

AUNT MARAMALDE: Ricky Roy, put that squirrel in the pot thar. Zeke, put your gun away. We don't want to scare the wits out of these city folk!

BILLIE JEAN: Can you believe it, Granny? Pa got the university people to come up the mountain! I can't believe it! This is gonna' be a good old time!

MA: Zeke, did you say Pa was bringing FOUR people? Why is he bringing so many?

GRANNY: I reckon those university people figured that this is a BIG job. Maybe they decided it would take a whole English department to educate the Murfrees.

RICKY ROY: Aw, Granny, are you really gonna' go through with that wish? I thought you were jest jokin'.

ZEKE: Granny, does this mean that we can't go coon huntin' tonight? Ricky Roy and I had big plans for some midnight huntin'.

GRANNY: Now, Zeke, you been married to my daughter for twenty years and I have never once asked you for anything, have I? You've been one pig-headed, lazy son-in-law and I've put up with it. For once you got to put up with me.

ZEKE: Pig-headed? Lazy? Granny, I thought you liked me all these years.

BEN BOB: Naw, Uncle Zeke. I've heard Granny call you a dumb ol' hunk of lard lots of times.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Granny! You ought to be ashamed!

MA: (*rushing to window, looking out*) Hush up, everybody! Hyar they come. Zeke's right! Pa is walking with four people. And they look mighty smart. Mighty intellectual.

BEN BOB: Aw! I hate those intellectual types!

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, goody! I love those brainy folks!

GRANNY: Well, come on, everybody. Look natural. Sit down and relax so you don't look like a bunch of ignorant hillbillies!

MAGNOLIA SUE: But, Granny, we ARE a bunch of ignorant hillbillies!

RICKY ROY: We may be hillbillies, Magnolia Sue, but YOU'RE the only ignorant one!

AUNT MARAMALDE: Hesh up, Ricky Roy! Don't you be a-startin' something!

(Door opens and PA MURFREE enters, followed by a hesitant PROFESSOR LIEBERMAN, PROFESSOR HILDEBRAND, JESSICA and ANDREW. They are dressed in preppy, college fashion. The two PROFESSORS carry books while JESSICA and ANDREW carry in an easel and a large writing tablet.)

MA: (*nervously*) Why, looky-hyar, it's Pa. He's come home from his trip to the valley. And look who he's got with him.....some visitors.

AUNT MARAMALDE: Well, come on in, folks, and make yourself comfortable. Welcome to the Murfree home.

PA: Hello, everybody. Yes, Ma, I'm back, safe and sound. Let me introduce our guests hyar. This hyar is Professor Lieberman and Professor Hildebrand from the English department at the university.

LIEBERMAN: (*stiffly, nodding*) How do you do?

HILDEBRAND: (*formal, uptight*) Nice to meet you.

MAGNOLIA SUE: Yep, Pa, those two look like college teachers, but who are those two young 'uns over thar? They look like they are Billie Jean's age.

PA: These young 'uns are students at the university, Magnolia Sue. This hyar is Jessica. She is so good in English that she is what you'd call a certified expert in Shakespeare. And this young man hyar is Andrew. He is as smart as Jessica. He's majoring in books.

ANDREW: (*clearing throat, correcting PA*) That's literature, Mr. Murfree. I'm majoring in English literature.

PA: That's it! He's good at reading and understanding books.

BILLIE JEAN: (*infatuated with ANDREW*) Aw, that's so romantic.

BEN BOB: Romantic? What's romantic about reading and understanding books? I'd rather be out huntin' fer rattlesnakes!

JESSICA: (*horrified*) Oh, my goodness!

MA: Welcome, Professors and young 'uns. We are honored to have you in our humble home. I'd like to introduce the family to you. You done already met Pa Murfree. And I'm Ma Murfree. This hyar is our son, Ben Bob, and our daughters, Billie Jean and Magnolia Sue. This hyar is Pa's brother, Uncle Zeke, and his wife, Marmalade. And over thar is their son, Ricky Roy. And last but not least is the reason you are hyar. This is Granny Murfree, the head of our clan.

GRANNY: (*extending hand*) I'm as pleased as a pig in slop to meet all of you. I'm as happy as a mockingbird in a honeysuckle patch that you four have agreed to come up the mountain to grant my dyin' wish.

LIEBERMAN: It was such an interesting offer that Pa Murfree made to us. It was just too exciting to turn down.

HILDEBRAND: Definitely. We consider it a sort of scientific experiment to be able to interact with you and your family.

RICKY ROY: I knew it! They think we are some kind of weirdos that they can observe like laboratory animals. That's why they're hyar!

HILDEBRAND: Oh, no, young man. You're wrong. We are delighted to be here in a teaching capacity. We simply have never had the opportunity to present educational material to the local mountain people native to the area.

BEN BOB: (*confused*) Huh?

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, Ben Bob, what the nice professor is saying is that we mountain folk have never shown much interest in coming down to the university, so they are more than glad to come to us.

RICKY ROY: Just like I said, they are using us like guinea pigs!

GRANNY: Now, shut your trap, Ricky Roy. Let's get down to business. I don't know how much longer I have on this good earth, so I want to make the most of the time I have left. Perfessers, are you ready to get to work?

PROFESSOR LIEBERMAN: Why, certainly, Granny. We brought a few things with us that our students need to set up. Jessica and Andrew, why don't you just get the easel and tablet arranged over there?

(points to downstage right)

ANDREW: Yes, sir, Professor. Right away.

(HE begins setting up)

BILLIE JEAN: **(infatuated)** Oh, isn't he pleasant and likable?

PA: All righty, folks. Let's take a load off. **(points to couch and chairs)**

BILLIE JEAN: **(embarrassed)** What Pa means is.....won't you please have a seat?

(The two PROFESSORS sit in chairs in center stage while JESSICA and ANDREW move downstage right near the easel/tablet. GRANNY rolls her wheelchair to downstage left and other characters place themselves in positions on couch, in chairs, and on floor to create different levels.)

GRANNY: Now, Murfrees, listen up to your 'ol Granny. As you all know, I can feel the years takin' their toll on me. Doc Hawkins says that any time now, the great rocking chair in the sky will call me home. And when it calls me, I'll be ready to go. But thar's one thing I want to see before I leave this good earth. I want to see my family educated. Thar are many ways a person can be educated. But one sure sign of an educated person is knowin' and understandin' Shakespeare. Now I know thar are some members in this family who don't know who Shakespeare is.

ZEKE: We know NOW, Granny. We've a-heard you talk about him so much lately that we found out who he is.

RICKY ROY: So who is he, Pa?

GRANNY: Hold your horses, Ricky Roy. That's why we brought in the experts. **(pointing to professors and students)** It's your cue, Perfessers. Give us some of your higher learnin'.

HILDEBRAND: Our pleasure, Granny. It will be our pleasure. Professor Lieberman, since your area of expertise is Shakespeare's life and times, why don't you do the honors?

LIEBERMAN: Of course, of course. **(standing, clearing throat)** Well, now. Where should I begin?

MAGNOLIA SUE: That's easy. Start at the beginning. When he was born.

LIEBERMAN: Certainly. Good idea. **(clearing throat)** William Shakespeare was born in the country of ...

BILLIE JEAN: **(loudly)** England! Not Scotland, not Ireland, not Wales. England!

BEN BOB: Aw, shut up, Billie Jean! You're sech a know-it-all! You're jest trying to impress that smart boy over thar! **(points to ANDREW)**

BILLIE JEAN: **(angry)** I am not, Ben Bob! Jest because you are a stupid, good-fer-nothin'...

GRANNY: All right, you varmints! Hesh up! The professors are trying to present a lesson hyar! If you start up one more time, I'm gonna' tan your hides.....and you two know I'll tan you good!

MA: Listen to your granny, Billie Jean and Ben Bob. I don't want to hear you interruptin' the nice perfessers again. Now, tell 'em you're sorry.

BEN BOB: **(hanging head)** I'm sorry, Perfesser. I didn't mean to.

BILLIE JEAN: **(embarrassed)** We won't disturb you again. I'm sorry.

LIEBERMAN: **(nervously)** Of course. Certainly. Apology accepted. Jessica, why don't you assist me in presenting Shakespeare's life? You know all about it.

JESSICA: **(proudly)** Certainly, Professor Lieberman. It will be my pleasure. Now.....where were you?

MAGNOLIA SUE: He was talkin' about where William Shakespeare was born.

JESSICA: Of course. William Shakespeare was born in the country of England in the year 1564. He was born in the small village of Stratford-on-Avon. The Avon is the river that flows through Stratford; hence the name, Stratford-on-Avon. At the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married a woman named Anne Hathaway who was seven years older than he.

BILLIE JEAN: He got married when he was eighteen? Oh, how romantic!

BEN BOB: Why would he go and do a dumb thing like that? And why in tarnation did he marry an older woman?

JESSICA: Want to hear something really shocking? William and Anne Shakespeare's first child was born six months after they got married!

RICKY ROY: You mean he was a teenage father? We got lots of teenage fathers up hyar in these hills, don't we, Pa?

UNCLE ZEKE: Hesh up, Ricky Roy!

GRANNY: Hesh up fer sure, chilluns! Now, I'm not going to say it agin! Be quiet and try to learn something from the perfessers and students.....even if they are eye-bulging facts about the great Shakespeare! Perfesser, please tell us some more.

LIEBERMAN: All right, Granny. William and Anne Shakespeare had three children: two girls and one boy. Their names were Susanna, Judith and Hamnet. Judith and Hamnet were twins.

AUNT MARAMALDE: They had boy and girl twins? Now ain't that sweet!

LIEBERMAN: In 1585, Shakespeare moved to London to begin his career in the theater: first, as an actor, then as a full-time playwright. He would return home to Stratford to see his family, but his wife and children never moved to London.

Shakespeare began writing poems and plays in 1590 and over the years, he became a highly regarded playwright. Tragically, his only son, Hamnet, died at the age of eleven while Shakespeare was in London.

MA MURFREE: His son died when he was eleven years old? Well, that's plumb terrible. That's the saddest thing I ever heard! Poor William Shakespeare!

AUNT MARAMALDE: And how about his wife? Poor Anne Shakespeare! How did the boy die?

HILDEBRAND: Hamnet contracted a fever. It was the greatest tragedy in Shakespeare's life. He rode a horse hard from London trying to make it to Hamnet's bedside before his son died, but he didn't make it in time.

GRANNY: (**shaking head**) Poor man. What a shame.

LIEBERMAN: In 1613, Shakespeare retired to Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. He was not an old man by today's standards when he died.

BILLIE JEAN: Let me figure it out! If William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616, he was..... (**counting fingers**)52 years old when he died.

GRANNY: Gracious sakes alive, he was a youngster when he passed on!

ZEKE: I didn't know he started out as one of those actors.

LIEBERMAN: That's how he broke into the theater. He had to get his foot in the door before the theater people would read his plays.

HILDEBRAND: Now let's talk about the language of Shakespeare. This is what frustrates people when they read his plays. The people spoke differently in Shakespeare's time than the way we speak today. The time period and language were called "Elizabethan"..... named for the Queen of England during Shakespeare's day.

GRANNY: Ben Bob, if the time and language back then were called "Elizabethan", can you figure out who the Queen of England was at that time?

BEN BOB: (**scratching head**) Elizabethan? Let me think a minute hyar.....

RICKY ROY: That's why you can't get out of the first grade, Ben Bob. You can't figure things out. The Queen back then was Elizabeth. Hear it? Elizabethan.....Elizabeth?

BEN BOB: Oh, yeah! I hear it. Queen Elizabeth. Yeah, I get it.

MA: Good boy, Ben Bob. You're learnin' somethin'. I knew you would.

GRANNY: Now, Perfessers, talk about the Elizabethan language. How is it different from the way we talk nowadays?

HILDEBRAND: Well, Granny, it's a beautiful way of speaking the English language. But there are lots of words that Shakespeare used back then that we don't even use today.

MAGNOLIA SUE: Oh, yeah? Like what words?

HILDEBRAND: Andrew, why don't you give us a few Elizabethan words? You know hundreds of them.

ANDREW: Certainly, Professor. Let me start with some of the most commonly used words of Shakespeare's time. Words such as hither, whither, thou, wherefore, art and adieu.

BEN BOB: Those are city words! Words that city slickers use to sound all uppity and better than everybody else!

ANDREW: Not so, Ben Bob. Elizabethan words aren't used much anymore. (**sarcastically**) Certainly not around these parts.

BILLIE JEAN: (**swooning, to ANDREW**) Why don't you jest ignore him and say some more of those purty words?

ANDREW: Why don't I quote a few famous lines from ROMEO AND JULIET, one of Shakespeare's most famous plays?

BILLIE JEAN: (**in love**) Oh, please do.

ANDREW: (**with a dramatic pose**)

"But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief,

That thou her maid art far more fair than she;

Be not her maid, since she is envious;

Her vestal livery is but sick and green

And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.

It is my lady, O, it is my love!"

BILLIE JEAN: (**overcome with passion**) Oh, bust my heartstrings! I'm in love!

(**SHE runs to ANDREW, hugging him and trying to kiss him.**)

JESSICA: Oh, my goodness!

PA: Billie Jean, behave yourself!

MA: What in the world, child! Get ahold of yerself!

MAGNOLIA SUE: That Elizabethan language sure did it fer Billie Jean!

BEN BOB: (**moving to pull BILLIE JEAN away from ANDREW**) You're acting like a hog in heat, Billie Jean! What's wrong with you, girl?

ANDREW: (**in shock**) What did I do? What did I do?

GRANNY: (*laughing, slapping knee*) You made my granddaughter fall head over heels in love with you, young man, with all those purty words!

ANDREW: (*amazed*) I've never had a girl react like that to my Shakespeare! It usually makes them fall asleep!

BILLIE JEAN: (*as BEN BOB holds her back*) I've never heard sech beautiful words in my whole life!

BEN BOB: (*disgusted*) Well, you would make the pigs out back blush with shame if they could see you. What a spectacle you made of yerself!

AUNT MARAMALDE: That's all right, Ben Bob. It's a wonderful thing to fall in love.

RICKY ROY: Those words made her fall in love? Oh, Ma, that's hogwash!

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, talk some more, Andrew. Say some more of that purty Shakespeare stuff.

GRANNY: Yeah, Andrew, keep talking.

LIEBERMAN: (*trying to restore order*) Well, now, why don't we calm down a minute and ask Professor Hildebrand to discuss the types of plays William Shakespeare wrote.

GRANNY: That sounds good, too. Crank it up, Perfesser.

HILDEBRAND: All right. Here we go. William Shakespeare wrote approximately 34 plays in his lifetime. That's a lot of plot, characters, settings and themes. The three types of plays that he wrote were tragedies, comedies, and histories. Jessica, discuss what a tragedy is for the Murfree family here.

JESSICA: Of course, Professor. (*writing on tablet*) Tragedy. That's spelled "T-R-A-G-E-D-Y". A tragedy is defined as a dramatic writing in which the main character does not overcome his problems or conflict and usually dies in the end, without attaining his goal.

MA: Oh, how sad!

LIEBERMAN: Shakespeare's most famous tragedies are ROMEO AND JULIET, MACBETH, KING LEAR, OTHELLO, and HAMLET.

ZEKE: Oh, yes, I've heard of HAMLET. Didn't he have a little brother named Omelet?

LIEBERMAN: No. I don't recall that Hamlet had a little brother.

GRANNY: Tell us about what happens in that tragedy called HAMLET.

LIEBERMAN: The plot? All right. Jessica, why don't you discuss the plot of HAMLET?

JESSICA: My pleasure. HAMLET just happens to be my favorite Shakespearean tragedy.

BILLIE JEAN: Oh, I want to hear more about ROMEO AND JULIET!

END OF FREE PREVIEW