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BURN YOUR BOOKES: SEX, DRUGS AND BAROQUE'N'ROLL

Taffety Punk Theatre Company Presents:
The World Premiere of *Burn Your Bookes: An Alchemical Triptych*

Where: Capitol Hill Arts Workshop
When: Friday, April 30 through Saturday, May 22, 2010
All Tickets \$10

- * A play by Washington, D.C. playwright **Richard Byrne**
- * Directed by Taffety Punk Theatre Company Artistic Director **Marcus Kyd**
- * Featuring Taffety Punk Theatre Company Members:
Kimberly Gilbert, Joel D. Santner and Esther Williamson

Startling legends surround notorious 16th century English alchemist Edward Kelley. He was a fraud and cheat. A wife swapper. A vicious drunk who dug up graves to question the dead and steal alchemical tincture. A magician who changed children into donkeys.

But who was Edward Kelley really? Richard Byrne's play *Burn Your Bookes: An Alchemical Triptych* tries to answer that question. The playwright revisited primary sources and delved into contemporary writing on alchemy and Kelley to write a new portrait of the legendary alchemist as a clever, ruthless and surprisingly modern figure.

Alchemy is often depicted as a weave of magic, mystery and swindle. The image persists largely because alchemists did their best to create and maintain it. "Keeping people in the dark as you labored to bring knowledge to light is a key element of the alchemists' practice," says Byrne.

When you look past the shadows, Byrne adds, Kelley's story emerges as an earthier tale of sex, drugs, poetry, intrigue, and proto-science. "Rulers of the late 16th century saw alchemy as a research and development arm of their Renaissance empires. These emperors and queens invested great sums, expected success and did not tolerate failure."

Taffety Punk Theatre Company Artistic Director Marcus Kyd will direct *Burn Your Bookes*. He's drawn inspiration for his vision for the play from the heightened realities and bold lines of graphic artists such as Kelley Jones III, Mike Dringenberg, Dave McKean and Charles Vess.

"So much of the activity in the play is devoted to presenting circumstances, objects and people as other than what they truly are," Kyd observes. "What drew me to the play was this great opportunity to explore these chasms between shadows and illumination,

between mutation and essence, between presentation and truth. It is a dangerous world, not unlike our own.”

Byrne says that one of the unexpected delights of researching and writing the play was the chance to relate the story of Kelley’s stepdaughter Elizabeth Jane Weston – one of the few published women poets of the Renaissance. “Her poetry is linked inextricably to the rise and fall of Kelley,” says Byrne. “Many of Weston’s poems were written as supplications to the Emperor and other courtiers in order to retrieve Kelley’s lost estates.”

A Q&A with playwright Richard Byrne about alchemy, Edward Kelley and *Burn Your Bookes* is appended to this press release.

More information and high-resolution photos at <http://www.taffetypunk.com/contact.html>

Performances at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, beginning on Friday, April 30. Additional performances at 3 p.m. on Saturdays.

Capitol Hill Arts Workshop is located at 545 7th Street, SE, Washington, D.C. 20003 (Orange and Blue Lines: Eastern Market Metro)

Tickets are \$10 and available at <http://tix.taffetypunk.com> or by calling 1-800-838-3006.

Taffety Punk Theatre Company won the John Aniello Award for Outstanding Emerging Theatre Company at the 2008 Helen Hayes Awards. Taffety Punk’s mission is to establish a dynamic ensemble of actors, dancers and musicians who ignite a public passion for theatre by making the classical and the contemporary exciting, meaningful, and affordable. They have garnered critical praise and wide audiences for their provocative stagings of Shakespeare, innovative new work by local playwrights and ensemble collaborations such as the January 2010 premiere of *suicide.chat.room*.

Richard Byrne is a playwright and journalist living in Washington, D.C. A one-act version of *Burn Your Bookes* took first prize in the 2007 Prague Playwriting Festival. His first play, *Untangling Ava*, won first prize in Washington University’s 1989 A.E. Hotchner Playwriting Festival and received its world premiere in that university’s Drama Studio in May 1989.

Byrne is the editor of *UMBC Magazine* – a publication of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He has worked at a number of publications, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Washington City Paper* and *Baltimore City Paper*. His criticism and essays appear regularly in *The Nation* and *The American Prospect*. His work has also appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy* and *New York Press*. Byrne has also written liner notes for rereleases of Uncle Tupelo’s *Anodyne* and R.E.M.’s *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*.

Byrne took a B.A. in English at UMBC in 1986. He received an M.F.A. in Writing (Poetry and Playwriting) from Washington University in St. Louis in June, 1989.

Marcus Kyd is Taffety Punk Theatre Company's Artistic Director. He directed Taffety Punk's sonic dance theatre concerts *suicide.chat.room*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Phoenix and Turtle* as well as last year's world premiere of Gwydion Suilebhan's *The Faithkiller*. As an actor his credits include Arena Stage, Round House Theatre, Theatre J, Folger Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Nebraska Shakespeare Festival, Metro Stage, Center Stage, Kennedy Center, and Happenstance Theater. Marcus holds a BFA from Emerson College, and MFA from the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Academy for Classical Acting at the George Washington University. Mr. Kyd is a Taffety Punk.

Q&A with playwright Richard Byrne on alchemy, Edward Kelley and *Burn Your Bookes: An Alchemical Triptych*

Why is alchemy so difficult to understand today?

The English historian Charles Nicholl writes that “*Like all occult systems, alchemy employs a language of symbolism and subterfuge. You enter a linguistic labyrinth full of cross-references and false trails. Its strange and wonderful images -- its green lions and red kings, its nigredos and albedos, its lactating virgins and cannibalistic couplings -- have a multiplicity of interpretations and counter-interpretations.*”

The simpler answer is that alchemists wanted it that way. In this case, knowledge really was power. If everyone knows how to do what you do, then why are queens and emperors going to employ you?

Another problem is that you had to get results. And though alchemy was a forerunner of modern science, its methods and approach to knowledge were often at odds with what we now call the “scientific method.” Modern science values transparency, clear writing, and a gradual approach to knowing via hypotheses and experiments. Alchemy was murky, metaphorical and often attempted to work backward from grand cosmological schemes.

Why is *Burn Your Bookes* a triptych?

The information that we have about Edward Kelley is so contradictory that it is almost impossible to fashion a clear and straightforward narrative.

We know almost nothing about Kelley before 1582 (when he was 27 years old) except for wild legends about necromancy, forgery and criminal acts. Then he steps into the home of John Dee – one of the great English intellectuals of the Renaissance – and we have six years of the minutest detail about him: visions he saw in a scrying glass, drunken escapades, fights with his wife, his strange relationship with Dee, and Dee's report that he did indeed appear to “manufacture” gold.

Then Kelley breaks with Dee in 1588 and the record of him becomes more obscure again. We know he was made a knight in Emperor Rudolph II's court. He was thrown in jail – not for alchemical fraud, but rather to prevent him from leaving Bohemia to return to England. He's released to find himself impoverished, and is eventually thrown in jail for debt and dies in prison. Even his death is murky. There are tales of an escape attempt, and even suicide.

The play is structured in such a way as to capture those contradictions of Kelley's life and character. Each of the plays three acts informs the other two acts, and informs against them too.

The play argues that Kelley was not a charlatan. If not, how did he get such a bad reputation?

Three main reasons. The first was the growing notion – reinforced even in contemporary plays such as Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) – that alchemy equaled fraud. Kelley was by far the most famous English alchemist; thus, he was seen as the biggest fraud.

The second reason was the posthumous publication in 1659 of John Dee's extraordinarily detailed diaries of his "spiritual actions" (i.e., crystal gazing) with Kelley as *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits*. The diaries not only revealed that Dee and Kelley talked with spirits and were given an "Enochian language" by angels, but also that Dee and Kelley drew up and acted upon a compact to share all things in common, even their wives. It'd be scandalous today; think about the reaction in 1659.

A third reason that Kelley has continued to have a bad reputation is modern scholarship on John Dee, which steadfastly denigrates Kelley to reestablish Dee's reputation as one of the great – and most interesting intellects – of the Renaissance. The project of restoring Dee was long overdue and has produced rich and wonderful scholarship. But many of the scholars who've embarked upon it have cut through the knotty complexities of the Kelley/Dee relationship by deriding Kelley, eliding Kelley, or just plain ignoring him.

Who was Elizabeth Jane Weston?

Part of my inspiration to write the play was to address the role of the women in the tale of Kelley's life. What did Kelley's wife (Joan Kelley) and Dee's wife (Jane Dee) make of this strange episode of "cross-matching" that their husbands concocted?

But as I researched and wrote the play, the story of Kelley's stepdaughter, Elizabeth Jane Weston, intrigued me. She was a teenager when Kelley died, but her story sheds a great deal of light on what we know about his later years. We know that he employed a tutor to teach her Latin. We also know that around the time of his death, she began writing poems in Latin. Many of them were poems to the Emperor or other important figures in Prague, presenting herself as a poor English girl in Bohemia seeking redress for the injustice done to her family.

A woman writing Latin verse in 1602 was well past novelty. Westonia (as she styled herself) was a sensation among the network of Latin-speaking poets and writers across Europe. (One even sent her a laurel wreath.) We also know she had contact with other prominent alchemists, including Oswald Croll. (The Folger Shakespeare Library has a copy of her first book, called *Poemata*.)

Another interesting thing about Westonia is that her connection to Kelley was largely hidden from the time of death until the 20th century, even though she mentions Kelley in a poem to the emperor in her first book. Two Czech scholars rediscovered the connection in the 1920s, but English-speaking researchers did not pick up on it until the 1970s. Considering the continuous interest in Kelley from the time of his death to the present, this hidden relationship suddenly bursting forth into view in our own era after three centuries proved too tantalizing to resist dramatizing.