

BOOKFILTER'S AUGUST PICK OF THE MONTH

MICHAEL GILTZ | AUGUST 1, 2018

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Every month, BookFilter selects the best new theater book, exclusively for Broadway Direct readers.

THE SPY OF VENICE

By Benet Brandreth

\$25.95, Pegasus Books

Some people look at the accomplishments of William Shakespeare and think, *Impossible!* How could a poorly educated bumpkin display such a remarkable grasp of world affairs, literature, history, and the human heart? It's just not *possible* that William Shakespeare could actually *have been* William Shakespeare! He must have been a front for someone else!

Other people look at the accomplishments of William Shakespeare — the poet, the actor, the theatrical impresario, the leader of a troupe, not to mention the writer of the greatest body of plays in the history of the world — and think, *Not enough!* They wonder, *Well, but what did he do on his days off?* And so Shakespeare becomes a detective or a spy or a time traveler or one

of a thousand other exciting occupations in his spare time, when not dashing off iambic pentameter.

Apparently, author Benet Brandreth falls in the latter category. For his day job, Brandreth is the rhetoric coach for the Royal Shakespeare Company. And in his spare time, Brandreth writes fictional swashbucklers about the early days of Shakespeare. The first is just coming out in the U.S.

Called *The Spy of Venice*, it doesn't — at first — refer to our poetical hero. He's a bit of a cad, cheating on his young wife, bored at work in the family glove shop, and always eager to share a drink with and sop up the tales of actors when they barrel through town. When Shakespeare taunts a local official one too many times (bedding the man's daughter will do that), it seems wise to decamp to London, and Shakespeare is off — with a glad heart, it must be said.

In the great city, Shakespeare discovers a gift for versifying and that leads the troupe into the employ of Sir Henry, who really is a spy. They all head to Venice, Italy, their secret mission is imperiled, and Shakespeare is entrusted with documents that will ensure England's alliance with Venice and save his country from the doom of Spain ... if he can figure out exactly who he's supposed to give the papers to ... and when ... and why.

Brandreth has great fun here, doing exactly what you would expect by turning the rich dramas of Shakespeare into his own treasure chest, plundering it for plot twists, bits of dialogue, and more. The players joke about "The Tailor of Venice," Will's mother offers him advice echoing that of Polonius in *Hamlet*, the most boisterous actor in the troupe might as well be dubbed Falstaff, and so on and so forth.

In truth, *The Spy of Venice* owes more of a debt to Alexander Dumas than to Shakespeare, what with the flashing swordplay, scheming popes, honest courtesans who are as beautiful as they are brilliant, and the like. Still, theater buffs will delight in the winking wordplay and count themselves clever for spotting so much of it. And anyone who enjoys a good romp will be satisfied and eager for the sequel.

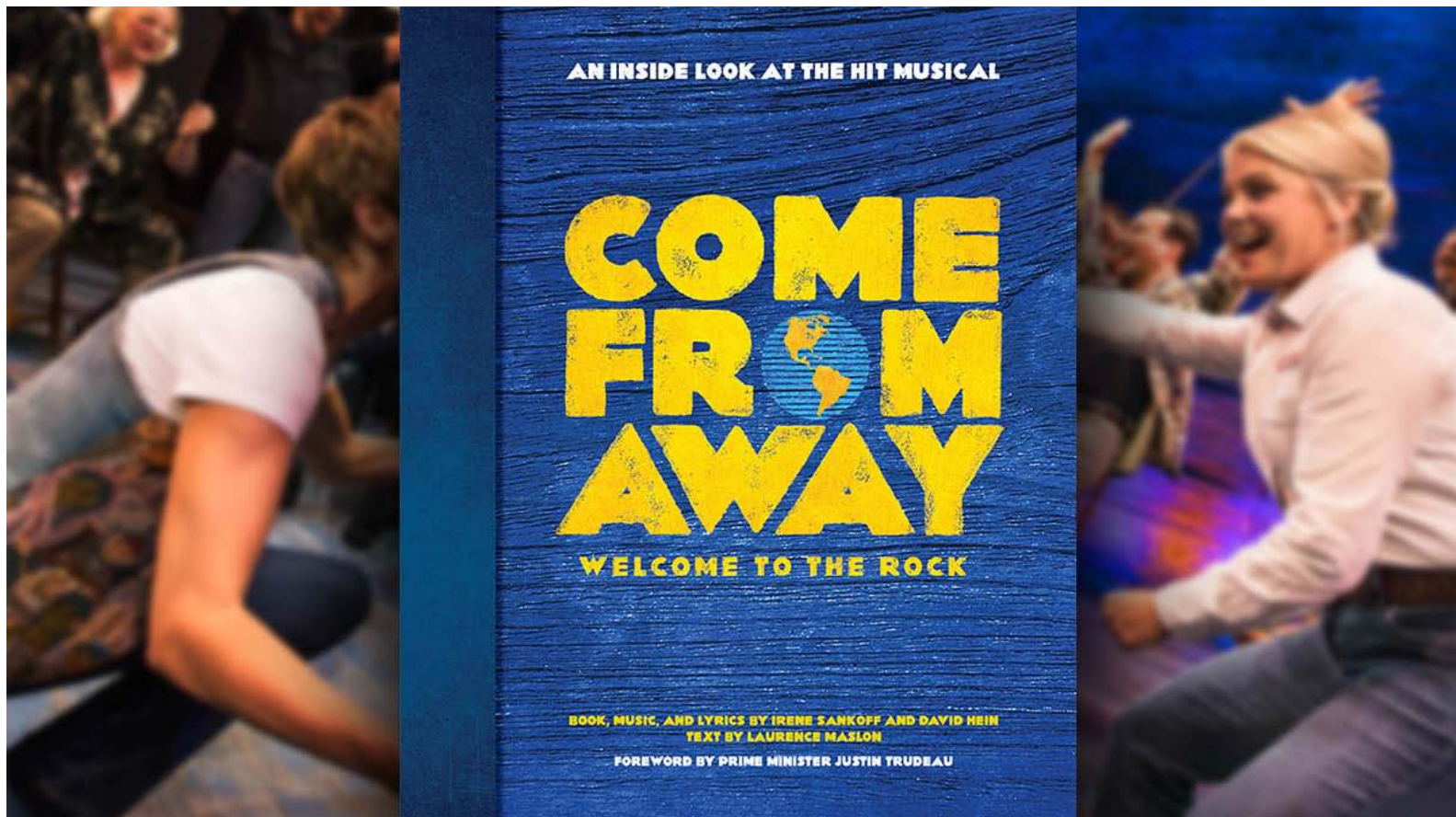
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