

*Scavengers* is a collection of twenty poems and paintings by the poet Kiran Millwood Hargrave and the painter Tom de Freston. The works respond in different degrees, to the plays of Shakespeare. The publication includes a foreword by Dr Abigail Rokison and an essay by Sir Trevor Nunn. It accompanies the unveiling of the full collection of paintings and poems at the Cambridge Shakespeare Conference in September 2011.

*“extraordinarily original”  
“immediate and totally contemporary”*

SIR TREVOR NUNN



# SCAVENGERS

PAINTINGS AND POEMS IN RESPONSE TO THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

*By Tom de Freston and Kiran Millwood Hargrave  
Edited by Edward Quekett*

### *The Artist*

**Tom de Freston** has held numerous prestigious positions, including the Leverhulme Artist in Residency at Cambridge University, the Levy Plumb Artist in Residency at Christ's College, and has been the Artist in Residence at the Leys. On Easter Sunday 2011 his new altarpieces were permanently installed to mark the 500th Anniversary of Christ's College Chapel. An extensive list of leading figures have published articles on Tom's work, including Sir Nicholas Serota, The Hon. Rowan Williams, Ruth Padel, Richard Cork and Dr Caroline Vout. He has exhibited widely and his work is included in various public collections. He is currently represented by HRL Contemporary, with whom he has a solo show in London from September to October 2011.

[www.tomdefreston.co.uk](http://www.tomdefreston.co.uk)

### *The Poet*

**Kiran Millwood Hargrave** is a published writer and recent Cambridge graduate, where she read English and Drama with Education at Homerton College. This is her debut collection of poems. She was the editor of *Ekphrasis* in 2010, a collection of fifteen poems, which included a foreword by John Mole. During her time in Cambridge she appeared in fourteen plays and was a regular theatre reviewer for *Varsity*. She is currently working on her first novel, and from January 2012 will be living and writing in Berlin.

### *The Editor*

**Edward Quekett** is a designer, photographer, and a finalist Art Historian at the University of Cambridge. He has had photos published in *The Mays*, an anthology of poetry and visual art, *Aviary*, a termly poetry and art collection, and *The Times*. In addition, he has been elected CUADC publicist, graphic designer of his college's June Event, and involved with a number of theatrical productions in Cambridge as set, lighting, or publicity designer.

*[Exit, pursued by a bear]*

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In memory of Lucian Freud

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# FOREWORD

## DR ABIGAIL ROKISON

As I recall, the seeds of this project were sown in a supervision between myself and Kiran – we had almost certainly become side-tracked from matters academic. I mentioned the planned Cambridge Shakespeare Conference – ‘Shakespeare: Sources and Adaptation’, and she told me about her work with Tom, creating paintings and poems, some inspired by Renaissance literature. When the three of us began to talk in earnest it soon became clear that Tom and Kiran’s work might not only form the centre-piece of the conference in the form of an ‘Ekphrasis’ exhibition, but might also be extended into an education project – inspiring young people to create art and poetry inspired by Shakespeare’s work. Little did I imagine that these early conversations would lead to such a wealth of vivid and evocative work, or that the proposed education project would lead to Kiran and Tom being invited to run sessions at the Saatchi gallery in London on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Over the past 18 months, Kiran and Tom have worked closely to create an artistically rich and varied collection of paintings and poems. The paintings take inspiration from the production history of Shakespeare’s work – *Elizabeth Siddal as Ophelia* and *Ian Charleson as Hamlet*; scenes from the plays – *The Blinding* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; and some of the plays’ central themes of violence, love, lust and familial relationships. In turn, the poems take their inspiration from the rich tapestry of the paintings, spinning off in a range of directions to create something new and original, and yet intimately linked to Shakespeare’s writing.

I am absolutely thrilled that the project has succeeded in linking Shakespeare,

art, poetry and education, creating works that are inspiring in themselves, and also encouraging young people to look afresh at Shakespeare's themes, images and characters, and to use this insight in creative ways. I can think of a no more fitting setting for this exhibition than the Education faculty at Cambridge, which prizes creativity in education so highly.

Finally, I would like to thank Tom and Kiran for all their hard work in creating this stunning and thought-provoking exhibition. As the huge variety of contributions to this conference bear witness, Shakespeare's work has inspired a rich tradition of responses in art, poetry, prose literature, drama, dance, music, cartoons, film and many other popular artistic mediums. Tom and Kiran's work provides a further contribution to this fertile tradition, and will, I hope, inspire others to continue to draw on the plays' complex and richly depicted characters, resonant themes, vivid images, poetic and rhetorical language, and abundant and varied performance history, to create their own original work.

*Abigail began her career as a professional actor, training at LAMDA. Her acting work includes numerous roles in theatre, and, amongst other television roles, Primrose Larkin in ITV's The Darling Buds of May. Following her PhD at Cambridge, she became a lecturer in Drama and English in the Education Faculty and Director of Studies in English and Drama at Homerton College. Her monograph, Shakespearean Verse Speaking, was published in 2010 by Cambridge University Press, and she is currently working on a book – Shakespeare's Children: Adaptations and Re-workings of Shakespeare for Children and Young People – to be published by Continuum in 2012.*

# ESSAY

## SIR TREVOR NUNN

*In this essay Sir Trevor Nunn provides a unique response to the poems of Kiran Millwood Hargrave and the paintings of Tom de Freston. Having directed most of Shakespeare's canon and having held the positions of Artistic Director at the RSC (1968-86) and Director at the National Theatre (1997-2003) his insights into Kiran and Tom's body of work are uniquely informed by a wealth of experience and knowledge.*

Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev... Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Cole Porter... Millais, Burne-Jones, artists of every discipline have given us their 'take' on Shakespeare; illustrators have imagined his characters and most famous scenes, film directors have made their screen adaptations, novelists have written works loosely based on the stories of his plays, and especially in the last few decades, theatre directors have re-imagined most of the canon, finding contemporary political parallels in the tragedies, updating the histories, and using the fashion excesses of recent decades to illuminate the comedies anew. Self-styled 'purists' are often horrified. But having run the world's leading Shakespeare company for nearly twenty years, I say a resounding "yes" to every experiment, every disturbance of what has become generally accepted; and however outlandish or unexpected a directorial or design 'concept' may be, the text of the play is still there, virgin, unsullied, waiting to be explored by the next group, and most important, by the next generation. As Prospero says, "No harm done."

This collection of paintings by Tom de Freston, inspired by Shakespeare, and poems by Kiran Millwood Hargrave, responding to those paintings, exactly



expresses my belief that personal and passionate responses to Shakespeare are invariably invigorating, exciting and necessary. How could I feel otherwise, having directed a *Timon of Athens* set in the gleaming plate glass world of international banking, giving way to the detritus of a car graveyard; and a *Love's Labour's Lost* as a memory play, triggered by the nightmare of a battle in the First World War; and a *Merchant of Venice* set in the war mongering anti-Semitic Europe of the 1930's; and a *Richard II* in a contemporary England in the grip of a monarchist versus republican debate; and a... I won't go on.

It's clear though that I arrive at Tom's paintings not resisting but wanting to be challenged by his personal response to plays I think I know inside out. It's equally clear to me that Tom is what we must term a 'post Freudian', influenced not only by Sigmund but also by Lucian. Sigmund would be most interested in the way the paintings are frequently dream like, as in sexual and sensual dreams, and in the collision of opposites (a female mask on a sprawled nude male body, a crowned king on a toilet, a bird beaked creature having climactic intercourse with a naked woman...). And Shakespeare is himself fascinated with dreams, as we know from *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, not to mention the nightmare world of *Macbeth* and the sexual fantasies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

But these paintings also put the human form under a merciless gaze; Tom refuses to idealise our bodies, our genitalia, our corpulence or our angularity – a gaze which implicitly acknowledges Lucian Freud's oeuvre, in its unsentimental, unforgiving and at times baleful scrutiny. Ophelia lies naked, confined in a bathtub, rather than floating in a stream; the Macbeths slump in exhausted contemplation in a Psycho blood-spattered bathroom, Othello contemplates the murder of his erotically naked Desdemona in an intensely private situation that might instead become marital rape. Juliet lies abandoned to her sexual fantasies, naked on a shroud-draped bed in a climactic dream of her Romeo. Even Lear is naked, with his naked dead daughter, and naked

again exposed to the elements while his fool disappears under an umbrella. As Shakespeare concluded, the human being is a “poor bare forked animal” and Tom is determined not to let us forget this strand, not only in the ultimately pessimistic tragedy *Lear*, but in many of the foregoing plays. The most vividly theatrical insight in this distinctly vivid collection (for me, having recently directed *King Lear*) is *The Blinding*, a Guantanamo world, lit by a single naked bulb, creating instantly a sense of a featureless grim environment in which anonymous faceless humans can torture, disregarding all the tenets of humanity. It’s my personal conclusion that in this play, Shakespeare abandons all belief in the human species as the central part of a heavenly plan. The gods, the object of repeated appeals during the escalating cruelty, are silent and never intervene, on the side of the good, the innocent, the faithful... and by the end of the play, as they fail to prevent Cordelia’s needless death, Shakespeare seems to be saying, “there’s nothing up there”. I get exactly that feeling of bleak despair from Tom’s harrowing *Lear* paintings, powerful to encounter and difficult to live with.

I have been discussing my take on Tom’s take on certain Shakespeare plays, but of course the other half of this extraordinarily original exhibition is Kiran’s take on Tom’s take on Shakespeare’s take on our complex nature. The fascination lies in us comparing our own response to Tom’s images, with those of a poet who daringly free-associates and uses her own life experience without restriction. For me, having been an occasional lyricist and versifier, that comparison is a definition of why I am a director and not (nor could I ever be) a poet. Kiran’s language is immediate and totally contemporary, more Beckett than Shakespeare in its tense spare economy, but revealing a wit and clarity without which this project – at once both complementary and competitive – could not have been achieved.

My personal favourite in this collection is her take on Tom’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* painting. *Boxgrove* is both Kiran’s own fantasy, and the Bottom as

donkey sexual experience from Titania's point of view – and against the odds, the poem manages to achieve something both highly sensual and hilarious.

This exhibition is called Scavengers, after Kiran's poem responding to Tom's own encounter with the last scene of *King Lear*. I was reminded by Tom recently that A. L. Rowse once described Shakespeare as "a magpie". Indeed he was, a thieving magpie at that, as he borrowed his plots and characters from previously existing works. Yes, Shakespeare's plays were, in large measure, takes on what other writers had previously created, which in our litigious age, would be very close to plagiarism. But he converted his responses into the greatest body of dramatic work ever created. In that spirit, I hope everybody experiencing these paintings and poems will scavenge through them and leave with everything they can take.

*From 1968 to 1986, Sir Trevor was artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, directing over thirty productions, including most of the Shakespeare canon. From 1997 to 2003, he was director of the National Theatre, where his productions included Troilus and Cressida, Oklahoma!, The Merchant of Venice, Summerfolk, My Fair Lady, The Coast of Utopia, A Streetcar Named Desire, Anything Goes, and Love's Labour's Lost. Other theatre includes Nicholas Nickleby, Les Miserables, Arcadia, Cats, Starlight Express, Heartbreak House, The Lady From The Sea, Hamlet, Richard II, Rock n Roll, Cyrano de Bergerac, Flare Path, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.*



**PAINTINGS AND POEMS**

**TOM DE FRESTON**

**KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE**



*Lovesong*; 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Lovesong

Sonnets lie in the  
Iambic pentameter  
Of their fruitless fall.



*MSND*; 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas; 2011



## Boxgrove

The way we loved felt underhand  
The way I fell with an uncapped velocity  
And with some impossible urgency  
Commenced my search for your mouth  
And lipped gum ringed teeth bigger  
Than my palm. And palmed you,  
Bigger still, with hands I grew to fit your  
Bulk, made myself a swelling cave  
Fit to swim, to dive, to fill, clinging to  
The mast of your ears – the static fizzed  
Off your fur, fizzed between us,  
And your sweat sloughed down  
My legs, my breasts, poured into my ears  
With the rushing of your whinnying moans.  
You turned me animal that day  
(And night, and day again), made me question  
The very archaeology of our bones.



*Waterboarding*; 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Waterboarding

my face, a straw  
drawn

my cries, arrows  
ducked

my hair, a thicket  
shorn

my eyes, two stones  
plucked –



*The Blinding*; 180 x 120 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## The Blinding

They beat him black, blue, deaf and dumb.  
His two eyes felled by the balls of two thumbs,  
Dropped from their sockets; two rotten plums.  
Strapped him to the core of a withering ship  
    Slit his apple  
    And let it drip.

Something biblical, Ovidian, Shakespearean  
    In his punishment – certainly,  
An ancient fear for this modern-day  
    Tiresias.

In Mingora and London  
    Their children sleep on.

Blameless as a coin-toss.



*Elizabeth Siddal as Ophelia*; 180 x 120 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Swan song

Find her silent in the water  
Dreaming of Avalon, Avon, a river-anon  
Her skirts soaked, raining down into memory

Pulled down into silt, silk turned vicious  
In the viscous current, a cipher, another drop  
Siphoned into the mouths of others, thirsty

As the fish that whisper  
In the blackness, and sift through  
The darkening, and find

The silence on flattened feet.  
The flies flood her lips, as if  
Suckling at a teat.

Stars are seeded in the lilies  
And her pale hand drifts  
Conducts a swansong in the mists.



*The Macbeths*; 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas; 2011



# Pomegranates

I wish that children came  
Easy as a lie.

That blood came, dropped like  
So many seeds

Thoughtlessly.

It's as if someone has  
Sewn me up.

So I took the handle of a knife  
And split a slit.

Finally blood, for all the  
Months I missed.

Imagined a pomegranate  
Spilling red-bruised-black.

Imagined a girl her flesh  
Was blue and sad.

Imagined a boy his hair  
Was black like mine.

Imagined myself stretched  
Scream-open and alive.

It took five hours to  
Stitch me up.

They left my hands red, so as  
Not to forget.



*Bathroom*; 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Coronation

It was to be a simple thing – like  
Drowning a cat or downing a dog  
With a swift kick to the neck, or  
Nicking a wrist with a razor blade –  
Yet I was not prepared  
For my sometime friend splayed naked  
In his bath.

Afterwards, I observed from my enamelled throne  
His body in its death throes  
And felt a calm befitting a man  
Watching his sometime friend  
Fit his life  
Down a bath drain  
In a squelching, scarlet gracelessness.

Took a moment to remember him  
Felt, in these hands, the weight of a life wiped clear  
A sepulchre handed across  
In a room tiled with the blue-white chatter  
Of an effervescent crowd of bath salts.

Then drew a line four full and a quarter inches  
Along his hip  
And felt my way up – clawed  
Out his mortal clutter  
To leave him clean.

I shall be king if you shall be queen.



*Watercloset*; 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Proposition

I will take my pound of flesh  
After you've taken mine  
To the hilt.



*The Crowning*; 45 x 60 cm, acrylic on mdf; 2011

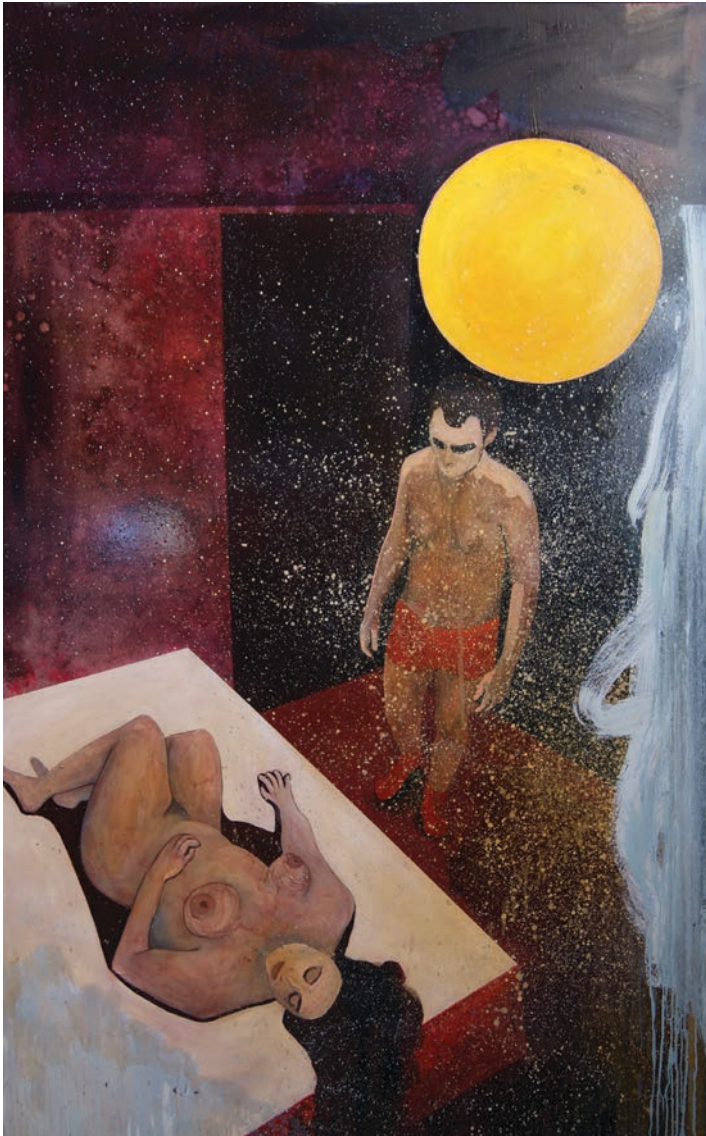
## Red Jack

It was my brother who told me about Red Jack,  
From his favourite comic book, Doom Patrol.

In himself he could see, and therefore claimed to be,  
Both God and Jack the Ripper.

He sat in his room torturing butterflies,  
In order to glean the pain he needed to survive.

I see that here, in the lying and the self-crowning.  
They will wear each others' face in the morning.



*Othello*; 180 x 120 cm, oil on canvas; 2011



## Strange Fish

I find her silver in the darkness  
Minnow-slick with night terrors  
Imagine myself a heron's beak  
Drunk on fishbones turned ferrous  
Wading through marble on webbed toes  
Following the metal glint of her bared teeth  
The waning fins skittering across  
The cotton ripples beneath.

Hands, each digit feathered and  
Singe-melded, putrid in the  
Slow arc of their winging descent  
Towards the white arch of her throat –

I strike from standing  
Swallow her whole  
Reel in the rush  
Unsteady as a foal  
Dropped wrong in the push.

I snap my tongue off at the root.  
I nose my hours dark and mute.



*Juliet*; 180 x 120 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Mongrels

I knew pain the day  
A mongrel ran weep-eyed  
Through the straits of this city  
And found me in a courtyard,  
Bit through my skirt, tore my hand  
And was torn to death with stones.  
The wounds bled for days and my  
Nurse was amazed I survived  
For winters more.

Now, in love,  
I run the hot Verona streets  
Like a dog with the devil in its blood.



*Birdsong*; 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Lepidopterist

Gentle, a Sunday butterfly collector,  
A weekly lover.

Who whispers across my body

Taut as a wing, pressed too hard  
And the dust that forms around our hips  
Is white as your throat, hot as your tongue

As I break, all shards,  
All shattered, all glass  
Sunlight in my grasp.



*I put a spell on you; 45 x 60 cm, acrylic on mdf; 2011*

## Coast

The walk along the cliff made me nervous  
With the waves rubbing swathes in our path.

Above all, the wind, plucking at my coat  
And snatching the laugh from your throat,  
Throwing it up and over the ragged coast.

You leaned into it, as you do now to me,  
Cast stones many feet down to land unseen.  
My bile rose as you tip-toed the line marked  
By the sudden drop, the top of the ground rising,  
Shunted up, like a flare to meet the dark.

Hands suckling at the fall of your back –  
I draw you closer in, bite the foam of your neck  
Tilt-keeled like a boat changing tack.  
Outside our window, a guillemot pipes.  
It has left its mother, and longs for a wife.



*Blasted*; 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas; 2011



## Skylight

The day you came in from the cold  
The ice followed you  
And frilled the windows  
Chased down the crescent of the moon  
Made snowdrops of your eyelids  
So you could not see  
Dover in the gloom  
Nor the sky light,  
Blossoming across the room.



*Blind Father*; 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Blind Father

I digressed into the dark/Made a cup of my heart/and saw that it was filled and  
emptied/according to the scrip.

I loved who I should love/and slept with silent women/with silent stars in  
their eyes/that were constantly dimming.

Walked to work each day/and talked along the way/with the policeman/and  
any kind of man/who had anything to say.

I worked with my hands/danced to swing-jazz bands/until I felt my mind go  
astray.

Now I work at my words/my sentences/my verbs/and fly towards life/ as my  
life flies away.



*Dead Son*; 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Blessing

Pushed from his mother  
    Bloodied, yawning  
    On his birthday.  
The scarlet awnings  
unfurled like a warning  
on his wedding day.  
Remember him  
    Eyes laughing  
    Mouth kissing  
Arms flung outwards  
Towards this wide world.



*Lear and the Fool*; 180 x 120 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Up

*This godly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory*

– Hamlet

Beneath the sandstone conduits and veins of quartz  
That stripe my side like impossibilities  
And lower still to the earth's end and the beginning of the unknown  
Lies my base. Solid, heat, imagined black and cuppable  
In a palm, rubbed smooth like obsidian. Then iron courses  
Writhing, drawn round like a clock face – there is no  
Stepping through but if you do – my mantle, de-furred  
And unyielding - break this and I come open with words words words  
Igneous basalt granitic amphiboles schists granulites like  
Great cysts waiting to be spurred. Nose your way up further still  
And find the sea in me, marinas crystallised into sandstone, shale,  
Auden's rock, his praise still audible and ringing around  
The frozen bubbles caught hard and still – a silence here,  
Many moments  
Stopped.

Push further and clasp the soil,  
Shifting through tree roots,  
Sifted by grasses and earthworms  
A thin wrapper layering me in;  
And perched on top,  
Two fools shouting at the wind.



*I put a spell on you again; 60 x 45 cm, acrylic on mdf; 2011*



## Curse

tongue flick and finger click  
neck crick and hand break.  
arm twist and leg wrench.  
exquisite smiles and exquisite pain,  
over and over and over again.  
thumb snap and elbow crack  
eyes roll and bells toll  
at funerals and weddings and  
one, two, three o'clock  
counting down and counting up  
don't trust a mouth,  
it writhes and kisses  
it sucks and swallows  
it soothes and smothers, tells old  
wives' tales and warnings of mothers  
toe pinch and nail winch  
pistol slap and ear trap  
hold down tight and then bite  
insides writhe, insides rage,  
insides discombobulate.



*Endscene*; 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Scavengers

One is reminded of a compass tilt.  
The steady drag around the maps  
Of the known world, tripping  
On a missed island, an invisible coast  
Roads not taken, rivers lost to ghosts  
Like a secret moor feeling its way into day  
And never quite there, not quite.

Every action is weighed  
Against an unmoving point.  
A control, our advances stayed  
By a hand not our own  
With history's weight  
Muscled, broad backed  
Braced against the weakling tide.

It pervades. It prevails.  
The slow knock of a hand on a door  
The hammer on the nail  
A cycle repeated, everywhere in  
Time and history, everyday  
Different people, new places  
Same ancient play.

In the dusk we forage  
Mired in the swamps  
Beach-bound by the tempest  
We are like scavengers  
Or thieves,  
Survivors of each other  
And the mess we leave.



*This is the End*; 200 x 140 cm, oil on canvas; 2011

## Endgame

A sudden rightness  
In fresh hell. The yawning lie:  
All's well that ends well.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr Abigail Rokison

Sir Trevor Nunn

Max Barton

The Education Faculty, University of Cambridge

Homerton College

HRL Contemporary

The Leverhulme Trust

The Leys

The Oxbridge Academic Program

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Designed and Typset (*Arno Pro* and *IM Fell Double Pica Pro*) by Edward Quekett