Writer’s Note

A Walking Shadow came from several places that are very personal to me: a lifelong connection to theatre, an important mentor from my own theatrical life, and things I have witnessed living in Albuquerque.

One of the people who helped shape Ralph was a theatre mentor of mine who spent decades teaching, acting, and living with Shakespeare. He always seemed to have a Shakespearean quote ready for whatever was happening around him. As he got older, I watched the physical demands of the work become harder, even though his love for it hadn't diminished. Ralph isn't a portrait of him, but that stayed with me: the idea of an aging actor carrying an enormous theatrical world inside himself even as the physical world becomes harder to navigate.

That became part of the way Ralph survives. A highway overpass can become the Globe. A shopping cart can hold the properties for *King Lear*. A group of people most of the city barely notices can become a company of actors. Shakespeare gives Ralph a language big enough to make his circumstances feel less small.

The other major influence was homelessness in Albuquerque. During large events like Balloon Fiesta, I've noticed encampments I had grown accustomed to seeing suddenly disappear from highly visible areas. I don't know what happened in every case, but the contrast always bothered me. The city could look cleaner for visitors while the people who had been there were simply somewhere else. It made me think about the difference between helping people and moving them somewhere we don't have to look at them.

One morning, while picking up trash near the river with my daughter, we passed a small group of unhoused people who were joking and laughing and seemed to look out for one another. My daughter commented that they seemed almost like a family. It was a simple observation, but it stayed with me because homelessness is so often discussed as a problem or a statistic that it can become easy to forget the relationships among the people actually living through it.

Other images stayed with me too. I once saw a man pulling several shopping carts containing everything he owned. Every object was meticulously organized, and tied to the final cart was a large, beautiful red balloon. I couldn't stop thinking about that balloon. There was order, taste, and personality in something most people probably passed without a second glance. Another time, I saw a woman who appeared to be unhoused dancing with an enormous smile on her face. I had no idea what she was experiencing and wouldn't pretend that I did. I just remember the joy and grace of the image and wondering how much of another person's inner life can remain completely invisible to us.

Those memories gradually found their way into Ralph and the Cibola Park Players. Ralph sees possibilities where other people see things to be removed or ignored. More importantly, he sees individuals where the outside world tends to see categories: addicts, vagrants, statistics, problems. Theatre becomes his way of insisting that these people deserve to be looked at long enough to be known.

I didn't want *A Walking Shadow* to pretend that putting on a play could solve homelessness. It can't. Ralph can't defeat poverty, mental illness, addiction, bureaucracy, or all the other forces affecting the people around him simply by performing *King Lear*. What theatre can do, at least for a moment, is give people a place to stand, something to contribute, and an audience willing to see them as more than their circumstances.

That is what the story means to me. Every person we pass is carrying a life we know almost nothing about. Ralph just refuses to let the people around him remain invisible.