Macbeth by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Director’s Note
Audiences familiar with our work may be surprised to see the physical space of the stage returned to the same configuration that we created last season for our production of Hamlet. Our intention to experiment with a fixed stage, reminiscent of Elizabethan playhouses and the Globe Theatre resulted in the stripping away of some of the trappings of contemporary scenic design—focusing instead on the language, characters and storytelling techniques inherent in Shakespeare’s texts. From the moment we began rehearsals on stage for Hamlet, we knew that we wanted to continue to explore this idea with another play—Macbeth. Fortunately, the audience was as enthusiastic about the idea as we were.

As with Hamlet, we are taking a somewhat historical approach to costume design in our production of Macbeth, a medieval Scottish world—serving the source material for Shakespeare’s play while affording audiences the opportunity to discover its own connections to contemporary life rather than transposing the play, through costumes, scenery and properties, into another time and setting. This is not to argue that more highly conceptualized productions of Shakespeare’s plays are not valid, or that we will not continue to explore “simile” and “metaphoric” approaches (as we have in most of our Shakespeare outings). But with both Hamlet and Macbeth, at least, we have taken a pause from contemporary references: no cell phones, video screens or contemporary music.

We hope you are enjoying this radical idea.

Charles Fee
DIRECTOR

Synopsis
Macbeth, set primarily in Scotland, mixes witchcraft, prophecy, and murder. Three “Weird Sisters” appear to Macbeth and his comrade Banquo after a battle and prophesy that Macbeth will be king and that the descendants of Banquo will also reign. When Macbeth arrives at his castle, he and Lady Macbeth plot to assassinate King Duncan, soon to be their guest, so that Macbeth can become king.

After Macbeth murders Duncan, the king’s two sons flee, and Macbeth is crowned. Fearing that Banquo’s descendants will, according to the Weird Sisters’ predictions, take over the kingdom, Macbeth has Banquo killed. At a royal banquet that evening, Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost appear covered in blood. Macbeth determines to consult the Weird Sisters again. They comfort him with ambiguous promises.

Another nobleman, Macduff, rides to England to join Duncan’s older son, Malcolm. Macbeth has Macduff’s wife and children murdered. Malcolm and Macduff lead an army against Macbeth, as Lady Macbeth goes mad and commits suicide.

Macbeth confronts Malcolm’s army, trusting in the Weird Sisters’ comforting promises. He learns that the promises are tricks, but continues to fight.

FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

Play Notes
Generous support for this dramaturgical content was provided by:
Donald F. & Anne T. Palmer
GREAT LAKES THEATER PATRONS

Macbeth is bold and intensely focused. With taut concision, it forcefully wields vivid language and violent action. It’s one of Shakespeare’s shortest plays. Written in 1606, it’s the mature work of a man who may have been world-weary but was confident in his power as a master writer and successful theater shareowner.

William Shakespeare came up in the London theater world in the 1580s and the 1590s. He joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, a theater company that prospered during the waning years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. By 1599, the company had the means to build a public playhouse, the Globe Theatre. When Elizabeth’s successor was crowned James I of England on July 25, 1603, the new king soon announced that the Lord Chamberlain’s Men would henceforth enjoy royal preferment as the King’s Men.

When James ascended to the English throne, Shakespeare witnessed a momentous shift—the peaceful transfer of power from one dynasty to another, from the Tudor to the Stuart. The Tudors had taken advantage of the dynastic struggle of the War of the Roses to fight and marry their way to kingship in 1485. Elizabeth I, the last Tudor monarch, had reigned for almost half a century, from 1558 to 1603. Since the unmarried Elizabeth had no children, and all other rivals had died of some mischance or other, the throne passed to James Stuart. James was already King of Scotland, heir to the dynasty that had ruled Scotland since the late 14th Century but also descended in a direct line from Elizabeth’s Tudor aunt.

Again and again throughout his career, Shakespeare returned to questions of governance and the nature and transfer of power. In 1587, when he was just breaking into theater, a book was published—the second edition of Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland, compiled by Raphael Holinshed—that he would continue to ransack for compelling examples of kingship in English history and “pre-history.” He would turn to Roman exemplars as well. In the early 1590s, he tackled the Tudor consolidation of power in the three parts of Henry VI and Richard III. The Plantagenet kings who preceded the Tudors provided material for other English history plays. But in 1605 and 1606, he looked through the lens of more distant times—ancient Britain and Scotland for King Lear and Macbeth, and ancient Rome for Antony and Cleopatra, which shared with Macbeth a “power couple” at its center.

The question of English succession might have seemed settled with James’ coronation in 1603. But civic unease was not quickly dispelled. England and Scotland were independent and rival countries only united in the person of James, with the more dominant England often striving to subjugate its northern neighbor. What if James’ ascension turned the tables on England? In 1605, a group of freelance theater writers, including Ben Jonson, who wrote sometimes for Shakespeare’s company, was thrown into prison for penning Eastward Ho!, a city comedy that satirized the Scottish nobles who were flooding London in those days.
The year 1605 also marked a graver threat to James. Although Queen Elizabeth had many times reaffirmed the split that her father, Henry VIII, made from the Roman Catholic Church, English Catholics had never tired of agitating for a reversal. They hoped for more tolerance from James, whose mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been a Catholic. But James, eager to win the support of the English Protestant majority, immediately promulgated several anti-Catholic policies instead. Catholic plotting against James swirled, culminating in the so-called Gunpowder Plot to blow up the king in the House of Lords, which was thwarted on November 5, 1605.

The year 1606 might thus have been a dangerous moment for a Scottish play. But Shakespeare carried it off. He flattered James. In Holinshed’s Chronicles, Banquo, James’ supposed ancestor, was a co-conspirator of Macbeth’s; in Shakespeare’s play, Banquo shuns Macbeth’s treachery but is promised “Thou shalt get kings” including those “that two-fold balls and treble scepters carry”—the symbols of James’ amalgamated power. The play’s prophetic witches were already part of Holinshed’s story, but Shakespeare heightened their sinister role, perhaps to play to James’ interests. A woman had confessed to trying to assassinate James through witchcraft at the North Berwick witch trials of 1590, and James had written about witchcraft in a 1597 treatise titled Daemonologie.

There are references in Shakespeare’s play to the Gunpowder Plot. A drunken porter babbles about a farmer, an equivocator and a tailor: two of the plotters used the aliases of Farmer and Taylor, and one of the accused, the Jesuit priest Henry Garnett, famously declared that equivocation, or not telling the entire truth, was acceptable in defense of the Catholic faith.

Shakespeare’s play, however, transcends a political moment. As king, his Macbeth is a polar opposite to the scholarly James. Macbeth is established as a charismatic warrior in the opening moments of the play. His “bloody execution” is celebrated as an ability to “unseam” an enemy “from the nave to the chaps.” As he kills to gain and secure power, however, he violates societal norms. He becomes “in blood/Steed’d in so far” that he cannot, as a Scottish lord observes, “buckle his distemper’d cause/Within the belt of rule.” By the end of the play, the warrior has been deemed a “hell-hound” and “dead butcher.”

The question of how manhood relates to physical valor threads through the play. “I dare do all that may become a man.” “When you durst do it, then you were a man.” “What, quite unmann’d in folly?” “What man dare, I dare.” “Dispute it like a man.” “But like a man he died.” Manhood is contrasted with the “womanly” defense of tears. Lady Macbeth summons courage for bloody deeds by crying “unsex me here.” Macbeth fears “no man that’s born of woman” until he hears that “Macduff was from his mother’s womb/Untempest ripp’d.” The play represents a dark meditation on the nature of humanity that is still unsettling.

Contemporary sheet music for a song, “Come Away,” that Thomas Middleton may have added to productions of Macbeth and to the text of the play as published in the First Folio edition of Shakespeare’s work that was assembled by the playwright’s colleagues in 1623. Most scholars agree that the First Folio text of the play bears signs of revision and interpolation, perhaps by Thomas Middleton, a younger contemporary of Shakespeare’s who became associated with the King’s Men and may have collaborated with Shakespeare on Timon of Athens and may have had a hand in revising Macbeth, Measure for Measure, and All’s Well that Ends Well. Two songs that also appear in Middleton’s own play, The Witch, of 1613-1616, are included in the First Folio text of Macbeth, as are speeches by Hecate, who was also a character in Middleton’s play.

Simon Forman, a school teacher and occultist, reported attending a performance of Macbeth on April 20, 1610, at the Globe Theatre—though some scholars claim that Forman’s diaries were later forgeries. Macbeth must have stayed in the repertory of the King’s Men, however. Although the tragedy was never published independently, it was included in the First Folio edition of Macbeth through the ages.

Macbeth
Through the Ages

- Simon Forman, a school teacher and occultist, reported attending a performance of Macbeth on April 20, 1610, at the Globe Theatre—though some scholars claim that Forman’s diaries were later forgeries. Macbeth must have stayed in the repertory of the King’s Men, however. Although the tragedy was never published independently, it was included in the First Folio edition of Shakespeare’s work that was assembled by the playwright’s colleagues in 1623. Most scholars agree that the First Folio text of the play bears signs of revision and interpolation, perhaps by Thomas Middleton, a younger contemporary of Shakespeare’s who became associated with the King’s Men and may have collaborated with Shakespeare on Timon of Athens and may have had a hand in revising Macbeth, Measure for Measure, and All’s Well that Ends Well. Two songs that also appear in Middleton’s own play, The Witch, of 1613-1616, are included in the First Folio text of Macbeth, as are speeches by Hecate, who was also a character in Middleton’s play.

- William Davenant revived Macbeth after the Restoration of the monarchy and the theaters in 1660. But it was actor-manager David Garrick who really brought the play to life for English audiences, with many dynamic performances of the title role from 1744 until his stage partner Hannah Pritchard retired in 1768.
Actress Sarah Siddons “owned” the role of Lady Macbeth from the 1780s through her retirement in 1812. Performing with her brother John Philip Kemble, she created an indelible impression with her expressive and passionate portrayal. She was still the standard for Lady Macbeths a century later, when Ellen Terry's more passive interpretation was compared, unfavorably, with Siddons' more powerful take.

On May 10, 1849, in New York City, American actor Edwin Forrest scheduled a performance of Macbeth at the working class Broadway Theatre to conflict with English actor William Charles Macready's presentation of the same play at the upper crust Astor Opera House. A riot broke out between supporters of both actors; and by the time this outbreak of class warfare was quelled, at least 25 were dead and more than 120 injured.

The 20-year old Orson Welles moved the play’s setting from Scotland to the Caribbean and employed an entirely Black cast and African drummers to create the sensational “Voodoo” Macbeth in a 1936 production for the “Negro Unit” of the Federal Theater Project.

An explicitly sexual interpretation of the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, pioneered by actress Sarah Bernhardt, played out in many 20th Century productions, notably a 1976 production of the Royal Shakespeare Company directed by Trevor Nunn and featuring Ian McKellen and Judi Dench.

Macbeth, from Inspiration to Production

A year ago, for Idaho Shakespeare Festival’s and Great Lakes Theater’s 2107 productions of Hamlet, producing artistic director Charles Fee and scenic designer Russell Metheny decided to create a wooden structure on the Robertson Stage that would evoke the structure of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre and would be surrounded, as the Globe Theatre stage was, by galleries for audience seating. “We are inviting the audience onstage to create an active sense of participation,” Fee explained at the time. “For those sitting in the traditional seating in front of the stage, the audience onstage will appear to be in the play—like a jury in a court room judging the events as they unfold.”

The audience’s marked enthusiasm for the immediacy of the Hamlet staging prompted Fee to revisit the same Elizabethan playhouse environment for this year’s production of Macbeth. Hamlet and Macbeth differ greatly in tone: Hamlet is a character of learning and reflection, Macbeth a man of feverish action who inhabits a pre-literate society. But both plays use soliloquies extensively to create an intimacy between performer and audience, a sense of communication that is amplified by the onstage seating and the playhouse setting. Macbeth’s soliloquies, observes Fee, reveal him as a character “plagued by an inability to stop himself from thinking forward. He is constantly projecting himself through his imagination into a future that is dangerous and problematic. The language is focused, like a knife blade in its sharpness.”

In Macbeth, says Fee, “we encounter a world of war—a place governed by ‘warlords’ through broad swords and pikes. As the play progresses, we see the beginning of the formation of a state that is governed by a system of justice.” The “look” of the physical production, in props and costumes, reflects this rough and rugged place.

Within this world, the witches operate in their own supernatural realm. A central platform, that can be raised and lowered by hydraulic lifts, creates a charged and charmed space for their conjuring. It’s important to Fee that the witches remain enigmatic, separate, and mysterious, their motivation and agency unknown. “They speak things that may be true, forecast a possible future. But they do not actively interfere. Shakespeare is interested in the question of free will. Do we live in a deterministic world?” In creating the physical environment of this production, big and broad questions like this one propelled the exploration of Macbeth undertaken by Director Fee and his design team and acting company.

The poster for Orson Welles’ so-called “Voodoo” Macbeth production in 1936

An 1822 print of Sarah Siddons in the role of Lady Macbeth


An 1822 print of Sarah Siddons in the role of Lady Macbeth

Ian McKellen and Judi Dench in the acclaimed 1976 RSC production of Macbeth.

Living leather and chain mail, costume designer Kim Krumm Somrson strove to create military attire that did not come across as a uniform. Explained Somrson, “These are groups of tribal warlords who come together and shifting alliances. There is no standing state army.” Contemporary fashion images provided exemplars for the layers of boiled wool, hanging pieces and dreadlocks that set the witches apart.

Edgy and whimsical images from contemporary fashion photography inspired the ragged, wrapped, and layered look that sets the witches apart in this production.