

## THE CURSE OF THE SCOTTISH PLAY

By The Royal Shakespeare Company

The Scottish Play. The Bard's Play. *Macbeth* is surrounded by superstition and fear of the 'curse' – uttering the play's name aloud in a theatre causes bad luck. But where did this superstition come from?

### 'Double, Double Toil And Trouble; Fire Burn, And Cauldron Bubble...'

Sixteenth century Scotland was notorious for its witch-hunts, mainly due to King James VI of Scotland's obsession with witchcraft. The violent death of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots by execution in 1587 was said to have inspired James' dark fascination with magic.

Later, in 1589 when James was sailing back to Scotland from Denmark with his new wife, Anne, their ship encountered violent storms at sea, and they were nearly drowned. The Scottish King blamed the evil spells of witches for conjuring the storm, and following his return to Scotland ordered a witch-hunt in the coastal town of North Berwick. He later wrote *Daemonologie*, a treatise on witchcraft to further inspire persecution against witches.

### Witchcraft To Please The King

James became King James I of England in 1603, and his new subjects were keen to appease him and his views on the demonic. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was published in 1604, and its shocking portrayal of witchcraft and association with the devil intensified England's fear of sorcery.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* followed in 1606 with direct references to James' earlier misfortune at sea: 'Though his bark cannot be lost, Yet it shall be tempest-tost'. Shakespeare was also said to have researched the weird sisters in depth; their chants in *Macbeth*, and ingredients of fenny snake, eye of newt and toe of frog, are supposedly real spells.

### Accidents, Injuries And Deaths — The Curse Of Macbeth

According to folklore, *Macbeth* was cursed from the beginning. A coven of witches objected to Shakespeare using real incantations, so they put a curse on the play.

Legend has it the play's first performance (around 1606) was riddled with disaster. The actor playing Lady Macbeth died suddenly, so Shakespeare himself had to take on the part. Other rumoured mishaps include real daggers being used in place of stage props for the murder of King Duncan (resulting in the actor's death).

The play hasn't had much luck since. The famous Astor Place Riot in New York in 1849, caused by rivalry between American actor Edwin Forrest and English actor William Charles Macready, resulted in at least 20 deaths and over 100 injuries. Both Forrest and Macready were playing *Macbeth* in opposing productions at the time.

Other productions have been plagued with accidents, including actors falling off the stage, mysterious deaths, and even narrow misses by falling stage weights, as happened to Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic in 1937.

### Breaking the Curse

So how can you avoid catastrophe if you utter the play that shall not be named? Exit the theatre, spin around three times, spit, curse and then knock on the theatre door to be allowed back in...



# Theatricum B

## MACBETH TRIUMPHS AT THE THEATRICUM

By Annemarie Donkin

On a night full of terror and fury, the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum proudly opened its 50th Anniversary Summer Season with an outstanding production of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* on Saturday, June 10.

A standing room-only crowd sat in rapt attention throughout the play and celebrated at the end with a sustained and well-deserved standing ovation.

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air"

Witches and spirits lurked about in the yonder forest as Macbeth and his equally power-mad wife, Lady Macbeth, concoct a horrific plan to murder King Duncan and seize power.

As Macbeth, Max Lawrence played the title role magnificently and with such ferocity that we could see him devolve from heroic general to maniacal tyrant right before our eyes.

Played beautifully by Willow Geer, Lady Macbeth is a scheming and conniving wife who encourages Macbeth to commit cold-blooded murder in a single, grisly act.

Her performance is so terrific that Geer takes Lady M from a once-proud woman to a mere specter haunted by bloody nightmares in a real tour de force. Brava!

During the play, the large cast used every inch of the outdoor theatre for their entrances, exits and battles. They actually surround the audience at points so that we all were part of the show, thus increasing the tension and terror.

In fact, there were stellar performances all around under Theatricum artistic director Ellen Geer's brilliant and expert direction.

Notable was Jeff Wiesen's intelligent and nuanced performance as Banquo, the questioning, curious and ultimately, moral center of the play when his murdered ghost appears and haunts Macbeth during a celebratory banquet.

Then, after Macbeth's rivals were slaughtered during a bloody coup, the superb Aaron Hendry as Macduff pulls his sword and organizes a revolt against Macbeth and ultimately beheads him, thus fulfilling the final prophecy.

Other cast members of note are Claire Simba as Lady Macduff; Cavin (CR) Mohrhardt as Malcolm; Franc Ross in dual roles as Duncan and the Porter; and Steven C. Fisher as Ross.

Also, in the cast are Marc Antonio Pritchett as Old Siward and Andy Stokan as the doctor.

### Double, Double, Toil and Trouble.

One can hardly mention the Scottish Play without noting the Weird sisters with their wicked incantations and prophesies. During a thunderstorm at the opening of the play, the witches dance about like daemons as they proclaim their prophesies to Macbeth and Banquo about who will and will not be king.

Later, amid the "double, double, toil and trouble" scene, the gloomy Hecate (Taylor Jackson Ross) presides over the otherworldly and evil incantations to Macbeth. Thus, the three prophesies inform the play through to its inevitable and bloody end.

(History says that Shakespeare used actual incantations in the play; perhaps that is why it inspired such fear among theatre folk.)

But, seriously, play it safe and don't utter the name of Macbeth inside the theatre. Having said that, run, don't walk to get your tickets. Theatricum's *Macbeth* is a must-see show!

*Macbeth* will run in repertory through September 23. A prologue (pre-show) discussion will take place on Sunday, Aug. 26 from 6:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Tickets to performances range from \$15 to \$48. Premium seating is available for \$60. Children 4 and under are free.

**Pay What You Will ticket pricing** (cash only at the door) is available on Friday, July 21 at 7:30 p.m.

Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley. The amphitheater is terraced into the hillside, so audience members are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating. Patrons are welcome to arrive early to picnic in the gardens before a performance.

For more information and to purchase tickets, call (310) 455-3723 or visit [theatricum.com](http://theatricum.com)