



The Curse of *Macbeth*

Is there an evil spell on this ill-starred play?

By DINA TRITSCH *Showbill*, April 1984

In 1604 Will Shakespeare in his zeal to please King James I, an authority on demonology, cast caution and imagination aside and for the opening scene of *Macbeth's* Act IV he reproduced a 17th century black-magic ritual, a sort of how-to to budding witches. Without changing an ingredient, Old Will provided his audience with step-by-step instructions in the furtive art of spell casting:

“Round around the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Swelter'd venum sleeping got.
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot”
...And so on.

The ritual's practitioners were not amused by this detailed public exposure of their witchcraft, and it is said that as punishment they cast an everlasting spell on the play, turning it into the most ill-starred of all theatrical productions. It is so unlucky that by comparison to *Macbeth's* nearly 400-year history of unmitigated disaster, Murphy's Law appears exceedingly optimistic.

Here are some of the gory particulars:

Beginning with its first performance, in 1606, Dear Will himself was forced to play Lady Macbeth when Hal Berridge, the boy designated to play the lady with a peculiar notion of hospitality, became inexplicably feverish and died. Moreover, the bloody play so displeased King James I that he banned it for five years.

When performed in Amsterdam in 1672, the actor playing Macbeth substituted a real dagger for the blunted stage one and with it killed Duncan in full view of the entranced audience.

As Lady Macbeth, Sarah Siddons was nearly ravaged by a disapproving audience in 1775; Sybil Thorndike was almost strangled by a burly actor in 1926; Diana Wynyard sleepwalked off the rostrum in 1948, falling down 15 feet.

During its 1849 performance at New York's Astor Place, a riot broke out in which 31 people were trampled to death.

In 1937, when Laurence Olivier took on the role of Macbeth, a 25 pound stage weight crashed within an inch of him, and his sword which broke onstage flew into the audience and hit a man who later suffered a heart attack.

In 1934, British actor Malcolm Keen turned mute onstage, and his replacement, Alister Sim, like Hal Berridge before him, developed a high fever and had to be hospitalized.

In the 1942 Macbeth production headed by John Gielgud, three actors -- Duncan and two witches -- died, and the costume and set designer committed suicide amidst his devilish Macbeth creations.

The indestructible Charlton Heston, in an outdoor production in Bermuda in 1953, suffered severe burns in his groin and leg area from tights that were accidentally soaked in kerosene.

An actor's strike felled Rip Torn's 1970 production in New York City; two fires and seven robberies plagued the 1971 version starring David Leary; in the 1981 production at Lincoln Center, J. Kenneth Campbell, who played Macduff, was mugged soon after the play's opening.

Of course, no explanations have been given for the seemingly inevitable toil and trouble that is part and parcel of this unlucky play. You don't, in fact, ever refer to Macbeth or quote from it unless rehearsing or performing it. You also don't, as explained to me by countless brave and talented actors from Glenda Jackson to Ian McKellen, refer to this haunted play by name, but instead you call it *That Scottish Play* or simply *That Play*; everyone, it seems, will get the message, in a flash.