



ABBHEY THEATRE  
**MACBETH**  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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**RESOURCE  
NOTES**  
**PHIL KINGSTON**

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
CHARACTERS	3
SUMMARY	3
THEMES	4
SCENE BREAKDOWN & COMMENTARY	6
CULTURAL BACKGROUND	12
ACTING SHAKESPEARE	13
ACT 1, SCENE 7	13
MAKING DRAMA SCENES	14
PRECISE PERFORMING ACTIONING	14
ANIMATING THE THEMES	15
SETTING UP AN IMPROVISATION	15
ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE	16
INTERVIEW WITH JIMMY FAY	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY & BIOGRAPHY	18

# 'IT WILL HAVE BLOOD; THEY SAY, BLOOD WILL HAVE BLOOD'

WELCOME TO THE Abbey Theatre's Resource Pack for *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's dark depiction of ambition, guilt and murder. Despite being written over 400 years ago, it's a play that continues to send a shiver down my spine.

I picked *Macbeth* because of its exploration of leadership, paranoia and morality. Also, of course, because it is one of the greatest plays ever written and because we were able to cast two of Ireland's finest actors in the title roles: Aidan Kelly will play Macbeth and Eileen Walsh will be Lady Macbeth. Rooted in the Irish landscape at the time of Cromwell, this muscular new production from director Jimmy Fay lays bare the darkest side of human nature. This production continues our commitment to staging the work of William Shakespeare and follows on from our presentations of *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Comedy of Errors*.

We want to encourage the widest possible access to the Abbey Theatre and to Shakespeare for audiences of all ages and I'm delighted that we will be offering schools performances and workshops alongside this production.

We hope the pack will provide you with new ideas and thought provoking material, whether you're a student discovering the play for the first time or a teacher returning to it for the umpteenth time.

I look forward to welcoming you at the Abbey soon.

Fáilte go dtí Paca Acmhainní Amharclann na Mainistreach le haghaidh *Macbeth*, léiriú dorcha Shakespeare ar an uailmhian, ar an gciontacht agus ar an dúnmharú. Ainneoin gur breis agus 400 bliain ó shin a scríobhadh é, is dráma é a leanann de bheith ag cur creathanna orm.

Roghnaigh mé *Macbeth* mar gheall ar anmionínúchadh a dhéantar ann ar an gceannaireacht, ar an bparanáia agus ar an moráltacht agus thairis sin, ar ndóigh, toisc go bhfuil sé ar cheann de na drámaí is fearr a scríobhadh riamh agus toisc go rabhamar in ann beirt de na haisteoirí is fearr in Éirinn a thoghadh sna róil teidil: Aidan Kelly, a mbeidh páirt *Macbeth* aige agus Eileen Walsh mar *Lady Macbeth*. Fréamhaithe i dtírdhreach na hÉireann le linn ré Chromail atá an léiriú nua téagartha seo leis an stiúrthóir Jimmy Fay, ar léiriú é ina nochtar an ghné is dorcha de nádúr an duine.

Leanaimid leis an léiriú seo dár dtiomantas i leith saothar William Shakespeare a stáisiú agus leanann sé na láithrithe a rinneamar ar *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet* agus *The Comedy of Errors*.

Táimid ag iarraidh an rochtain is leithne is féidir ar Amharclann na Mainistreach agus ar Shakespeare a spreagadh le haghaidh lucht féachana ón uile aoisghrúpa agus is cúis áthais dom é go mbeidh taibhithe le haghaidh scoileanna agus ceardlanna á dtairiscint againn i dtaca leis an léiriú seo.

Tá súil agam go n-aimseoidh tú idéanna úra agus ábhar spreagtha smaointe sa phaca seo, cibé acu an mac léinn tú atá ag cur eolais ar an dráma den chéad uair nó múinteoir atá ag filleadh air den mhíliú uair.

Tá mé ag súil le fáilte a chur romhat ag Amharclann na Mainistreach go luath.

**Fiach Mac Conghail**

Director *Stiúrthóir*

# INTRO DUCTION

**M***acbeth* is a psychological thriller and a work of profound poetry. It is one of the shortest and most exciting of Shakespeare's plays as well as one of the darkest. We may no longer believe in ghosts and witches but *Macbeth* has always been one of Shakespeare's most popular plays because of what it says to us about violence, ambition and morality. Even after four hundred years it is still considered so powerful many people believe it is cursed and won't say its name aloud in a theatre (where it is known as 'The Scottish Play')...

*Macbeth* isn't meant to be read, it's meant to be seen. In fact, it's meant to be seen and heard. In Shakespeare's time plays were performed in the afternoons in natural light with few props and no scenery. The Elizabethan audience weren't as swamped by images from TV, films or advertising as we are so playwrights had to use language to create the worlds of their plays. Audiences listened hard to the actors' words as well as watching what they did. There was a high demand for new plays - some might have had only one performance, so playwrights had to write quickly and memorably. They had to create dramatic stories that not only enthralled their audiences but could be learnt and performed in a few days. All this reminds us that the best way to appreciate his works is to see them as blueprints for performance; if you try speaking or, better still, acting a Shakespeare scene you will get far more out of it than just reading the words. Shakespeare put many clues in the text about how to act a scene - scenes that may be hard to understand on the page become clear once you get them on their feet.

In this resource pack, we will introduce the story and characters as a foundation for your own practical explorations. We'll look at some of the basic themes of the play and see in detail how these crop up through the story. Then by examining a scene and the acting technique of 'actioning' we hope to give you the tools to discover for yourselves why this play continues to fascinate and even terrify.

Focussing on key scenes is the basis of how Shakespeare is examined in the Leaving Cert. An effective study programme can be built around identifying these pivotal moments, the changes they mark in the characters and the language that reveals them. The scene breakdown section should help the students with this as well as providing plenty of material for discussion and improvisation.

One of the other great revelations of performing Shakespeare is how flexible the text turns out to be - how open to different interpretations. This pack was written to support the Abbey Theatre's production of *Macbeth* directed by Jimmy Fay. We've included an interview with Jimmy where he talks about his version of *Macbeth*, as well as some examples of other productions and adaptations.

# MAIN CHARACTERS

## MACBETH

A Thane (Lord) of Scotland serving under King Duncan. He impresses everyone at the start of the play with his bravery and loyalty but meeting the three witches awakens more ruthless ambitions. At first he's troubled by his conscience but by the end of the play he has become a brutal monster.

## LADY MACBETH

Initially more ambitious than her husband, Lady Macbeth is charming, intelligent and resourceful. She's capable of playing on her femininity to distract suspicion while privately denouncing her own womanhood for the sake of greater cruelty. By the end of the play her guilty conscience drives her mad.

## BANQUO

A friend and fellow Thane of Macbeth's. He is intrigued by the witches' prophecies but does not act on them. His suspicion of Macbeth's part in Duncan's death makes him a threat and leads to his murder. He's capable of putting on a front of loyalty.

## DUNCAN

A respected King of Scotland who is virtuous and benevolent. He may upset his loyal Thanes though when he announces his young son Malcolm will inherit the crown.

## MACDUFF

A nobleman who suspects Macbeth after Duncan's murder. He leaves his family to seek help from Malcolm in England. When they are murdered he vows revenge and becomes Macbeth's nemesis.

## MALCOLM

Duncan's first son whom he declares his heir. Initially he seems weak and uncertain but his time in England gives him more confidence.

## LADY MACDUFF

Wife of Macduff and mother of his children. The only major character unimpressed by the militaristic, male-dominated culture of honour throughout the play.

## LENNOX AND ROSS

Scottish noblemen whom we see becoming increasingly sceptical of Macbeth until they finally join Malcolm's side.

# SUMMARY

*Unconstrained ambition leads to loss of humanity.*

The play opens in a thunderstorm during which three witches plan to meet again after the end of a battle being fought nearby. In a military camp Duncan, the King of Scotland, is told that two of his lords (known as thanes), Macbeth and Banquo, have bravely and ruthlessly defeated invading armies, one from Ireland led by the rebellious MacDonald and one from Norway. Macbeth and Banquo come across the witches who address Macbeth as Thane of Glamis then Thane of Cawdor and finally as King. When pressed they also predict Banquo will beget a line of kings. Once the witches vanish, Duncan's men arrive to tell Macbeth he has been made Thane of Cawdor, as the current one is to be executed for disloyalty. Macbeth now wonders whether the witches' other prophecies will come true. The two friends then meet with a grateful King Duncan who plans to visit Macbeth's castle at Inverness. Duncan also announces his son Malcolm will inherit his throne. Macbeth writes to his wife telling her what has happened.

Lady Macbeth welcomes the news but worries her husband is too soft hearted to kill Duncan and gain the throne. When Macbeth arrives she overcomes his objections and proposes killing Duncan that night. She plans to get his attendants drunk then blame the murder on them. Initially Macbeth agrees but later wrestles with his conscience and has to be re-persuaded by his wife. That night Macbeth sees a vision of a dagger pointing him towards Duncan's chamber – the bell rings, the vision fades and he moves towards the chamber. Macbeth stabs Duncan but forgets to leave the daggers behind. Lady Macbeth returns them just in time as they hear a knocking at the castle gates. Once the hung-over Porter gets the gates open Macduff announces he has come to wake the king but discovers him murdered. Macbeth kills the drunken attendants in supposed rage. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee in fear of their lives.

Now King, Macbeth is still worried about the witches' prophecy that Banquo's sons will inherit the throne. He persuades two murderers to ambush Banquo and his son Fleance as they are returning to a royal banquet at Macbeth's castle. Banquo is killed but Fleance escapes. At the banquet Macbeth is unnerved by Banquo's ghost and rants at him while Lady Macbeth tries unsuccessfully to keep things calm. Macbeth revisits the witches who conjure three apparitions that predict for him firstly he must beware Macduff, secondly no man born of woman can harm him and thirdly he will be safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane

Castle. He is partially reassured until he hears Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth orders Macduff's property to be seized and his wife and children killed.

In England Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty by pretending to have a worse character than Macbeth. News comes of the further deterioration of Scotland under Macbeth's tyranny and his murder of Macduff's family. Macduff swears revenge as Malcolm is joined by other Scottish noblemen and the English general Siward. Meanwhile Lady Macbeth's guilt has driven her mad and she is observed sleepwalking and obsessively washing blood off her hands. Macbeth is despairing when he hears of her death but continues to fortify Dunsinane Castle until he hears that Birnam Wood is 'moving' towards him (Malcolm has ordered his soldiers to cut off branches and use them to hide their numbers).

Still clinging to the prophecy that he cannot be killed by 'man of woman born', Macbeth fights on, killing Siward's son. But when Macduff arrives, he reveals he was 'untimely ripped' from his mother (i.e. she had a Caesarean section). He kills Macbeth and beheads him. Malcolm reassures his followers that tyranny has ended and invites everyone to see him crowned at Scone.

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# THEMES

## A DARK AND ENIGMATIC THRILLER ABOUT TREASON, MURDER, A KINGDOM IN CHAOS, FORECASTS OF A DOOMED FUTURE AND BETRAYAL OF FRIENDS.

BEN CRYSTAL - SHAKESPEARE ON TOAST

Themes are ideas or issues that seem to recur throughout a play or book or film. Themes are different from the action of a story; they are the more general topics that the events of the story illustrate. For example, there are several murders in *Macbeth* but we'd say the play has a theme of violence (with a motif of murder) and particularly violence as an expression of masculinity and ambition.

Themes describe the fundamental, timeless preoccupations of humanity – love and hate, order and chaos, the individual and society. Looking at themes is one way of seeing why older works of literature survive. Even if the action is based in the past, the ideas still feel meaningful today. You don't have to be interested in medieval Scottish history to get into a story about ambition, guilt, ruthlessness and honour. Shakespeare's story is four hundred years old but still speaks to us today.

It is helpful though to connect with a play's themes by asking ourselves if we can think of an equivalent situation in our own time, or if we have ever had to deal with similar issues.

This personal connection is what engages us with stories. It's a reminder of our common humanity and can make something that seems irrelevant ("Who cares about a bunch of aggressive Scottish noblemen killing each other?") into something that speaks directly to our lives ("I never realised how much I care about being thought a 'real man'?" "Could someone really be so ruthless they'd be prepared to kill their own children rather than break a promise?")

No story is ever so fixed that everyone will see the same patterns in it. What people think a play is about changes over time. So the themes we feel are most relevant are the ones that reflect the preoccupations of our own age. You can see this in the sort of questions asked in exams about the same work, the ones they asked twenty years ago are different from the ones they ask today.

On the opposite page is a list of themes some of which we've traced through the play in the Scene Breakdown that follows.

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## BEING A REAL MAN (OR WOMAN)

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When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man.

LADY MACBETH 1.7

It's a man's world in this play's warrior culture. Apart from the witches, there are only two major female characters in *Macbeth*. One of them explicitly asks to be unsexed because she thinks her gender isn't cruel enough.

Being a man, in the sense of growing out of boyhood, also features in Malcolm's journey so that by the end of the play we are able to see him as a potential king. And when Young Siward is killed, his father says at least he died a man by falling in battle.

How men cope with grief is examined when Malcolm tells Macduff to 'dispute it like a man' – to struggle against it - while Macduff demands he be allowed 'to feel it like a man'. One of the most famous speeches in literature ("Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow") is from the, by now, monstrous *Macbeth* finding some insight upon hearing of the death of his wife.

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## CONSCIENCE

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Me thought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!  
Macbeth does murder sleep!"

MACBETH 2.2

Shakespeare focuses on *Macbeth's* inner struggle from his first appearance. We see how the witches' prophecy both troubles and excites him. Lady *Macbeth* tells us that he is 'too full of the milk of human kindness' so we know wrongdoing doesn't come naturally to him. You could say that the disintegration of one strong man's sense of principle was the 'spine of the play'.

Guilt and innocence are associated throughout the play with sleep, *Macbeth* doesn't seem to get a decent night's rest after killing Duncan and Lady *Macbeth* ends up sleepwalking while obsessively washing her hands. It's also interesting that 'good' Banquo is sleepless when he meets *Macbeth* before Duncan's murder. What's on his mind?

Sight and blindness is another motif connected with conscience especially the sense of wanting to hide one's crimes.

It isn't only the *Macbeths* who have pangs of conscience. *Macduff's* vengefulness may be fuelled by a sense of guilt at abandoning his wife and children as well as his moral outrage.

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## LEADERSHIP & TYRANNY

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Those he commands move only in command,  
Nothing in love: now does he feel his title  
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe  
Upon a dwarfish thief.

ANGUS 5.2

King Duncan is presented at the beginning of the play as a model of firm but fair leadership - even the rebel Cawdor dies proclaiming respect for him. Obedience springs naturally from the Scottish Thanes' loyalty to their king. Their sense of honour is tied in with this God-given hierarchy.

Macbeth's rule on the other hand is characterised by fear, mistrust and violence. He employs spies in every household, savagely murders the whole family of a rebel and bullies everyone in sight. Because his rule is 'unnatural' he must enforce it with power and as a consequence, the whole nation starts to fall apart. The play examines the contract between unnatural tyranny and natural leadership as reflected in the Elizabethan idea of The Chain of Being; see the section below on Nature Out Of Joint.

The characteristics of leadership are also relevant to Malcolm. He is promised the throne prematurely by his indulgent father despite having to be saved in battle. Macbeth's tyranny forces Malcolm to find real qualities of leadership

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## DEHUMANISING AMBITION

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I have almost forgot the taste of fears.  
The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.

MACBETH 5.5

In the course of the play Macbeth travels from being a brave and respected general to a ruthless, paranoid savage. Luckily for us he retains a chilling self-awareness and so describes the wearing down of his humanity in vivid detail. This makes the play a true tragedy - that someone with such obvious qualities should sacrifice them for what proves to be short-term power. Lady Macbeth starts as the more immoral of the couple. She actively asks the forces of darkness to suppress any 'natural' feelings of pity in her. After the banquet scene in Act 3 her presence and influence fade. That this charismatic woman should end up deranged and wretched is a loss of humanity from a different angle.

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## NATURE OUT OF JOINT

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Tis unnatural  
Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,  
A falcon, towering in her pride of place,  
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

OLD MAN 2.4

At the time the play was written there was still a strong belief in the medieval idea of The Great Chain of Being (Scala Naturae). This argued that the hierarchies of both nature and society were God given and reflected a fundamental order in the universe. To break this order (by killing a king, or disinheriting your daughter as in King Lear) was to invite chaos. This chaos was reflected in distorted images of nature such as Duncan's horses eating each other after his murder.

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## EVILS OF EQUIVOCATION

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And be these juggling fiends no more believed,  
That palter with us in a double sense,  
That keep the word of promise to our ear,  
And break it to our hope.

MACBETH 5.8

At the time the play was written one of the supposed conspirators of The Gunpowder Plot, Father Henry Garnet, had published a treatise arguing it was alright for Catholics to give vague answers (to equivocate) when under interrogation. At his trial this idea was held up as an example of evil thinking and throughout Macbeth equivocation is associated with the forces of darkness, for example, the witches' prophecies seem to promise security to Macbeth but end up being deceptive.

Though this might seem an old fashioned concern, only recently there has been controversy over a Catholic Cardinal's statement that "there may be circumstances in which you can use an ambiguous expression realising that the person you are talking to will accept an untrue version of whatever it may be". In other words you don't have to take responsibility if someone misunderstands you.

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## GOOD AND EVIL

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Not in the legions  
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd  
In evils to top Macbeth.

MACDUFF 4.3

*Macbeth* is concerned with good and evil. A strong contrast is made between the God-sanctioned rule of Duncan (and Malcolm and his allies) and Macbeth's devilish tyranny. The Church's view of man's existence - that all values were Christian, that sin leads to hell, that denial of God meant you favoured the devil - was still the model in Elizabethan times and Shakespeare would never have endorsed Macbeth's actions

### MACBETH IS THE MOST VITAL AND ENERGETIC CHARACTER WITHIN THE PLAY, A NATURAL FORCE, SURPASSING ANY CONVENTIONAL NOTION OF GOOD AND EVIL

PETER AKROYD - SHAKESPEARE THE BIOGRAPHY

Before Duncan's murder, whose side are you on? Are you appalled by what the Macbeths are going to do? Do you want them to be caught - or do you find yourself feeling complicit with them? How do you feel afterwards?

It's as if Shakespeare wants us to admit to the possibility of murder in our own hearts by making his villain the most interesting character. Too superficial a reading of good and evil may make you miss the insights of the play.

# SCENE BREAKDOWN & COMMENTARY

## ACT 1 COMMENTARY

The first four scenes get the ball rolling and the end of the act accelerates the tension. Lady Macbeth's comments about her husband's character might have cast doubt that he could be ruthless enough to pursue his ambition but the last scene shows her overcoming this. How will Shakespeare now exploit this tension theatrically? Are we going to jump to the aftermath of the murder or is there more to come before it happens?

### *Act 1 Scene 1*

#### SYNOPSIS

During a thunderstorm three witches part, arranging to meet again later with Macbeth.

#### COMMENTS

A short but atmospheric scene. What sort of play do you imagine you're going to experience if this is the first thing you meet? In Elizabethan times people were genuinely frightened of witchcraft. How could a modern director make this scene scary?

#### THEMES

Nature Out Of Joint: The witches final lines seem to exult in the grim conditions instead of escaping them.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

We usually think of nature as calming, beautiful and healing but here it is presented as violent and unpleasant.

### *Act 1 Scene 2*

#### SYNOPSIS

A wounded captain describes to King Duncan how Macbeth has distinguished himself by ruthlessly defeating the rebels and Irish invaders. A nobleman, The Thane of Ross, confirms Macbeth has also forced the Norwegian King to surrender. Duncan orders Ross to have another rebel, the Thane of Cawdor, executed and to tell Macbeth he has inherited the title.

#### COMMENTS

A breathless and exciting scene that conjures up the battles happening offstage.

#### THEMES

Being A Real Man: How does Macbeth kill the rebel Macdonald?

What sort of mood has all this fighting put the characters in?

Are they merciful to the defeated army?

Leadership: Macdonald and the Thane of Cawdor are condemned for being disloyal to the King.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

'As two spent swimmers that do cling together/  
And choke their art.' A good first example of the sort of dense vivid imagery that characterises Shakespeare's work. Try explaining it in your own words. Can you be as concise? Golgotha was the place of skulls where Jesus was crucified. Bellona was the Roman goddess of war. If Macbeth is her bridegroom what does that make him in the eyes of the captain? 'Villanies of nature' – a good phrase for the dark side of nature which haunts the play.

## Act 1 Scene 3

### SYNOPSIS

The witches meet again and one discusses the curse she is going to place on a sailor. Macbeth and Banquo arrive and the witches predict honours for a shocked Macbeth. When Banquo demands to know his own future their predictions are less specific. The witches vanish leaving the soldiers confused. Ross and Angus arrive to tell Macbeth he has been given the title of Thane of Cawdor, as the witches said. Macbeth is both frightened and excited that their third prediction he will be king may also come true. He arranges to speak privately to Banquo later.

### COMMENTS

We finally get to meet our title character who is quickly flung into a dilemma by the 'weird sisters'. He goes from loyal soldier, to newly honoured Thane, to imagining the murder of his king. Notice how Banquo takes things a bit more calmly maybe because his own predictions are less immediate than those of Macbeth. In this scene we see how life-changing news affects a character's sense of himself; Macbeth's ambition flowers before our eyes.

### THEMES

Conscience/ Sleep: How is the witch planning to torture the sailor?

Dehumanising Ambition: Banquo notes that 'the instruments of darkness' often attract a person with something that seems good.

Conscience: What is frightening Macbeth so much when he speaks alone about 'This supernatural soliciting'. He hasn't done anything yet?

Nature Out Of Joint: To kill a king goes so against the natural order even to imagine it makes him feel as if he is beginning to lose control.

Dehumanising Ambition: If Macbeth was made Thane of Cawdor without doing anything maybe that is how he will become king. But can he just let this happen knowing what he knows?

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

'You imperfect speakers' - a good description of the theme of equivocation.

'This blasted heath' - a symbol of the world the play takes place in.

'The earth has bubbles as the water has and these are of them' - what does this image say about the witches?

## Act 1 Scene 4

### SYNOPSIS

King Duncan's son, Malcolm, describes how Cawdor died honourably. Duncan praises Macbeth and Banquo while announcing he will pass on his power to Malcolm. Macbeth leaves to prepare his castle for the King's arrival.

### COMMENTS

At the time the Scottish kingship was not hereditary. Duncan lavishes gratitude on the two experienced soldiers but he still holds back all he could give them. The scene is full of ceremonious expressions of loyalty. At this point in the play it's important to establish the sort of attitudes that are about to be destroyed. Some directors though may choose to question how sincere all this obedience is. These first four scenes set up the

play's 'dramatic premise' and establish the warrior society and supernatural influences that are the background to the action.

### THEMES

Leadership: What does Cawdor do before his execution? Sigh/Conscience: What does Macbeth ask of 'The stars'? How does he hope to bypass his own conscience?

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

The expressions of loyalty and gratitude are long-winded and dense. How does Duncan thank Macbeth? How does Macbeth say that anything he does that is not in service to the king is tiresome? Are these men used to talking this way? 'Stars hide you fires/ Let night not see my black and deep desires!' - try saying this aloud. How does it feel?

## Act 1 Scene 5

### SYNOPSIS

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband about his meeting with the witches. She worries that his good nature will dampen the ruthlessness he'll need to become king. She calls on the spirits to obliterate any tenderness in herself. Macbeth arrives and Lady Macbeth announces Duncan will never leave their castle and warns Macbeth to look innocent lest he give them away.

### COMMENTS

A scene in which we learn a lot about Macbeth from his wife. Notice how Lady Macbeth has no thought of him leaving it to fate to become king. She assumes they will need to act to get the crown. She also takes over all the planning once he arrives. This marriage is one of the most famous in literature. In this short scene the actors need to convince us that these characters know each other deeply.

### THEMES

Conscience: How does Lady Macbeth characterise the qualities in her husband she thinks will hold him back?

Being A Real Woman: What does Lady Macbeth ask the spirits to do to her to ensure she's vicious enough to commit murder? What are the assumptions about men and women behind this? Sigh/Blindness: What does Lady Macbeth ask of the night to help in her plan? How are the spirits described?

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

'Thy letters hath transported me' - Lady Macbeth's ambition has a rousing, intoxicating quality. Many of the plays recurrent images are concentrated here - look for mentions of animals, darkness, violence and false appearances - the difference between how one looks and what one is feeling.

## Act 1 Scene 6

### SYNOPSIS

Duncan and Banquo comment briefly on the beauty of a bird nesting in Macbeth's battlements. Lady Macbeth makes them welcome. Duncan wonders where Macbeth is.

### COMMENTS

Macbeth's failure to greet his guests is the first indication his behaviour is being influenced by the witches. It's a break in protocol, which the resourceful Lady Macbeth handles graciously.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

More elaborate expressions of loyalty. How does Lady Macbeth lay on the deference? The 'temple haunting martlet' is a bird that often builds its nest in churches. It briefly symbolises the light and hope of Christianity in contrast to the overall darkness of the play. It may hint at Macbeth's former piety.

## Act 1 Scene 7

### SYNOPSIS

Macbeth leaves dinner to struggle with his conscience. His wife follows him and convinces him to continue.

### COMMENTS

This is a classic example of the basic ingredients of a dramatic scene, two people in conflict. Here the situation is simple, Macbeth wants to call off the plan and Lady Macbeth doesn't. All her speeches have a similar intention, to persuade Macbeth to change his mind, but how can the director and actors make it interesting? How many different strategies does she use?

### THEMES

Conscience: Macbeth's opening soliloquy is one of the most famous examples of a man struggling with opposing internal forces. Does he stop because he fears being caught? What else is on his mind?

Sleep/Ambition: Lady Macbeth links Macbeth's caution with falling asleep.

Being a Real Man: What does Lady Macbeth accuse her husband of being? How does she define a man? How does Macbeth compliment her once she has persuaded him to continue? What does she say she'd do rather than renege on a promise?

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Lady Macbeth's first two speeches to her husband contain short words, few longer than a syllable. What is the effect of this?

Look at the images between lines 16- 25 - angels, babes and cherubim. Can you imagine what these would actually look like? What is Shakespeare trying to evoke by choosing these figures? Many commentators have described this section as surreal, why?

Can you guess what it is to 'screw your courage to the sticking-place' from the context?

# ACT 2

## COMMENTARY

This act is all about the murder itself, the immediate psychological effects on Macbeth - his thrill and terror - as well as the symbolic consequences for the country. We see the shock in those close to Duncan, the swift and inaccurate placing of blame on his sons and the beginnings of suspicion of Macbeth. As we are not even halfway through the story this should signal to us that *Macbeth* is a play concerned with the consequences of violence. So what are these going to be?

### Act 2 Scene 1

#### SYNOPSIS

Banquo and his son Fleance are still awake when Macbeth appears. Banquo agrees to Macbeth's request to talk with him about the witches some other time. Left alone Macbeth has a vision of a blood drenched dagger. Upon hearing Lady Macbeth sound a bell he sets off to murder Duncan.

#### COMMENTS

The sense of menace in the play is contrasted by the short tender exchange between father and son, which is interrupted by the preoccupied Macbeth. This second meeting between the two friends is less relaxed than before, their shared experience of the witches has soured something in the relationship. Macbeth's second soliloquy is no struggle of conscience; he seems to relish the dark images of evil.

#### THEMES

Conscience/ Sight /Guilt: Is the dagger as real to Macbeth's sense of touch as to his eyes? Macbeth asks the earth to be deaf to his footsteps for fear it would announce his intent. Is this a sign he is uneasy?

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

In the second half of Macbeth's soliloquy he mentions Hecate and Tarquin. Who are they? Does knowing who they are change your understanding of the speech? Murder is personified in Macbeth's speech as a ghost and then by implication as Macbeth himself. What animals are associated with evil?

### Act 2 Scene 2

#### SYNOPSIS

Lady Macbeth waits nervously as Macbeth goes to murder Duncan. On his return he complains of taunting voices and won't return the daggers he has held on to by mistake. After Lady Macbeth returns they hear knocking at the gate. Lady Macbeth urges the distracted Macbeth to wash off the blood and pretend they have just woken up.

#### COMMENTS

A creepy scene that is the more frightening by showing the effect on the murderer, Macbeth, than the murder itself. And, like in life, things don't go according to plan. Macbeth forgetting to leave the daggers reflects the horror he feels at what he's done. Shakespeare raises the tension further by having someone visit at just the wrong time. This is what real crimes are like; messy and hurried versus the slick professionalism of a TV cop show.

#### THEMES

Conscience/ Sleep: In this scene Macbeth spells out the association of sleep with innocence and vulnerability, even Lady Macbeth, so dauntless up to now, says the sleeping Duncan looked so like her father she could not kill him.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

In this blood-soaked scene how does Macbeth express the size of his guilt at killing Duncan?

### Act 2 Scene 3

#### SYNOPSIS

A hung-over porter takes his time to unlock the gates to Macduff and Lennox who have come to wake Duncan. When Macduff discovers the murder, Macbeth kills the attendants in, he claims, a fit of revenge. Lady Macbeth faints in apparent shock. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain escape to England and Ireland, worried they may be next in line for assassination.

#### COMMENTS

The Porter is a comic interlude, a sort of breather from the main action, and may well have been improvised by the original actor, probably the company clown. His jokes are topical and some productions follow this tradition by updating them to comment on contemporary issues. On the discovery of the murder the tension racks up again. It's worth taking a close look at what everyone says in their state of shock (given that two of them aren't really shocked at all). How do the characters reveal themselves in their reactions?

#### THEMES

Dehumanising Ambition: Macduff likens the murder of a 'natural' king to the destruction of a holy temple.

Sleep: In this case likened to a state of innocent ignorance, a fake death in contrast to the real death of Duncan.

Being A Real Woman: Ironically Macduff at first doesn't want to tell 'gentle' Lady Macbeth what has happened.

Nature Out Of Joint: Macbeth describes Duncan's wounds as 'like a breach in nature'.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

'The primrose path to th'everlasting bonfire' - the life of pleasure and luxury that leads inevitably to damnation.

Notice how terse Macbeth is in his replies to Lennox's expansive description of the night. But when he emerges from Duncan's chamber his speech is more complex, almost as though he has prepared it. It is Macduff who bluntly tells Duncan's sons what has happened.

Lennox's description of unnatural noises echoes similar events in *Julius Caesar* the night before Caesar's assassination. His interpretation of the attendants' behaviour paints them as guilty but what might they actually have been feeling?

### Act 2 Scene 4

#### SYNOPSIS

An Old Man and Ross describe further unnatural events; darkness during daytime, an owl killing a falcon, Duncan's horses eating each other. Macduff arrives to say that Malcolm and Donalbain's escape has made them chief suspects and that Macbeth has travelled to Scone to be crowned king.

#### COMMENTS

A short straightforward scene but which in performance can reveal much more than simple information. Macduff is plainly sceptical of Macbeth; he doesn't say that he suspects Duncan's sons just that it is 'put upon them'. Nor does he say why he isn't going to Macbeth's coronation.

#### THEMES

Nature Out Of Joint: The Old Man's claim that he has never seen such a 'sore night' in seventy years emphasises how unusual it is.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

What grotesque animal behaviour symbolises Duncan's murder?



# ACT 3

## COMMENTARY

By the end of Act 3 we see how resigned to bloodshed Macbeth has become and how his behaviour has started to pollute the atmosphere of the court. He seems capable of anything. What will he do to Macduff? And will anything the witches say make him change his mind?

### Act 3 Scene 1

#### SYNOPSIS

Banquo shares his doubts in Macbeth while remembering the witches predicted well for his own offspring. Macbeth invites him to a formal dinner while asking where Banquo will be that afternoon. Alone, Macbeth confesses he will not feel safe until Banquo and his son are dead. Macbeth persuades two men that Banquo has wronged them and they agree to kill him and his son Fleance.

#### COMMENTS

There is a superficial steadying of pace as Macbeth settles into his new position as king but underneath all is suspicion and paranoia. Notice how long the scene is with the two murderers, they aren't simple hired assassins but men whose wretchedness and bitterness Macbeth plays upon for his own ends.

#### THEMES

Being A Real Man: Macbeth uses a complex argument about dogs. What is he saying about how he thinks a man should behave?  
Conscience/ Sight: What does Macbeth ask the murderers to do 'for sundry weighty' reasons?

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Banquo makes it obvious in his first speech he suspects Macbeth and yet plays the loyal lord later on. This might make us question the sincerity of earlier 'courtly' speeches.  
There is something new in Macbeth's use of language in the last part of the scene; notice the lists; reasons why the murderers should hate Banquo, types of dog and their descriptions and his very thorough way of giving instructions. What does this say about his state of mind?  
'Put rancours in the vessel of my peace' - a good summary of the consequences of Macbeth's actions. Macbeth bemoans the sterility of being king when he cannot bequeath the title to a son.

### Act 3 Scene 2

#### SYNOPSIS

Lady Macbeth tries to coax Macbeth out of his brooding in time for the banquet. He admits to being tortured by nightmares but reassures her he has set something up that will settle his fears.

#### COMMENTS

Now it is Macbeth who is making all the plans; he won't share them even with his wife. These scenes allow us to see directly into Macbeth's mind. The relish with which he calls on the night shows how deeply he has embraced the dark side. Notice also how Lady Macbeth sees their achievement as worthless if they remain troubled by what they have done. It's as if she's taken over the conscience Macbeth is slowly abandoning

#### THEMES

Conscience/ Sleep: How does Macbeth directly link these two?  
Dehumanising Ambition: What does Macbeth say is now necessary for them to do while they are unsafe?  
Conscience/ Sight: Macbeth asks the night to blindfold the day because its light is full of pity; it is only in darkness he can get away with murder.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Notice how Macbeth starts to welcome the night with something like a witches spell.  
What animal does Macbeth use to sum up his paranoia?  
The scene ends with an image so terrible even Lady Macbeth looks worried, what is it?

### Act 3 Scene 3

#### SYNOPSIS

The two murderers are joined by a third. They kill Banquo but Fleance escapes.

#### COMMENTS

Shakespeare builds up tension by having the murderers describe Banquo's approach. The entrance of a third murderer may imply Macbeth has become so paranoid he's hired one more to keep an eye on the first two.

### Act 3 Scene 4

#### SYNOPSIS

At the banquet Macbeth hears that Fleance escaped. When he sees Banquo's ghost sitting in his chair he is terrified and in spite of Lady Macbeth's efforts to reassure their guests the dinner breaks up. The scene ends with him questioning Macduff's loyalty and deciding to revisit the three witches.

#### WCOMMENTS

Macbeth's guilt is beginning to get out of control as the horror of his actions destroys the superficial politeness of the banquet. This is a challenging scene to stage, only Macbeth can see the ghost. By the end of the scene notice how fatalistic Macbeth has become, he's in too deep to ever escape damnation. This is when the real savagery of the play begins

#### THEMES

Being A Real Man: How does Lady Macbeth criticise her husband's behaviour?  
Nature Out Of Joint: Macbeth fears Banquo's ghost is a sign that the murdered will start to rise from their graves.  
Conscience: Just like the dagger he saw in a previous scene Macbeth's fears seem to be becoming real, this time Shakespeare actually makes them a character on stage.  
Conscience/ Sleep: Mentioned again by Lady Macbeth near the end of the scene. The value of sound sleep seems most appreciated by those who aren't getting any.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

What two types of animals are mentioned this time? Which ones symbolise bravery and which are used for witchcraft?  
How does Macbeth use blood to describe the depth of his depravity?

### Act 3 Scene 5

#### SYNOPSIS

Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, chides the three witches for not including her in their dealings with Macbeth. She tells them he is coming again and that they will trick him into his own destruction.

#### COMMENTS

Considered by most editors to be an interpolation, meaning a scene added by someone other than Shakespeare.

#### THEMES

Dehumanising Ambition: Even if this is another author they have captured Macbeth's central weakness in the final two lines of Hecate's monologue.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

How does the use of language in this scene differ from what you've read so far? This is one of the ways scholars can tell if a scene isn't genuine, can you see a difference?

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## Act 3 Scene 6

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### SYNOPSIS

Lennox summarises to a fellow Lord the 'official' version of Duncan and Banquo's deaths. The Lord reports that Malcolm is raising an army in England. Both men fear for Macduff's safety because of his defiant attitude.

### COMMENTS

Here we learn the extent of Macbeth's malign influence on the Scottish nobility.

### THEMES

Leadership: Loyalty has broken down under Macbeth's tyrannical rule and there is now a climate of fear and mistrust. Who is invoked to help Malcolm raise his army?

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Lennox seems to be taking Macbeth's part but what few small clues show he condemns him? How does the Lord characterise the natural bonds of loyalty that have been lost?

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# ACT 4 COMMENTARY

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This act marks Macbeth's descent into barbarism. Emboldened by the witches' visions, he believes himself invincible and is prepared to destroy whoever stands in his way. We are also beginning to see the forces of resistance; the moral, Christian response which seeks to restore the natural order. But given the messages of the three apparitions, how can anyone hope to defeat Macbeth?

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## Act 4 Scene 1

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### SYNOPSIS

The three witches prepare a spell. Hecate and more witches join them. Macbeth is shown three visions that tell him firstly to beware Macduff, secondly that none of woman born can harm him and lastly that he will never be defeated unless Birnam Wood move to Dunsinane Hill. He demands to know if Banquo's prophecy still holds and sees a line of kings that implies it does. After the witches disappear Lennox informs him Macduff is fled to England. Macbeth declares he will murder all of Macduff's family.

### COMMENTS

Again Hecate and her singing and dancing witches are considered to be an interpolation. They certainly break the spell of the witches' disgusting recipes. Macbeth's emotions lurch between extremes. When he first arrives he is still suffering from sleepless anxiety, this turns to relief on hearing he is invincible and then horror that Banquo's heirs will usurp his. He declares he will no longer reflect on what he's doing but act impulsively. His humanity is finally gone.

There is specific reference to Shakespeare's patron King James I in line 136/137 'and some I see/ That twofold balls and treble sceptres carry '.

### THEMES

Conscience: In the final speech Macbeth decides to act on impulse, leaving no room for conscience to play a part.

Nature Out Of Joint: When he challenges the witches to answer him Macbeth lists the unnatural disruptions the dark arts are capable of.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Can you see a difference between the way Shakespeare's witches speak and Hecate and her followers? Notice the detail of their ingredients.

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## Act 4 Scene 2

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### SYNOPSIS

Ross tries to reassure a frightened and resentful Lady Macduff that her husband had good reason to flee, given the times. He leaves and Lady Macduff and her son discuss traitors. Suddenly a messenger arrives to warn of approaching danger but mother and son are slaughtered by Macbeth's soldiers.

### COMMENTS

With the exception of the weird sisters, the only other major female character in the play gets the chance to speak and is scathing about her husband's behaviour. The domesticity and gentleness of this scene accentuates the machismo of the rest of the play.

### THEMES

Nature In Joint: A rare example in the discussion of the wren of nature symbolising virtue instead of malice.

Being a Real Woman: Notice what a different set of priorities Lady Macduff has to all the talk of loyalty and honour we've heard from the men.

Leadership: The conversation with her son nicely sums up the two moral worlds of the play, virtue versus power.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Lady Macduff and her son talk briefly in a way more associated with Shakespeare's comedies where being 'witty' meant to speak intelligently and succinctly. They play on the meanings of words but the conversation doesn't calm Lady Macduff's anxiety. What image does Lady Macduff use to show the weak fighting back against the forces of darkness?

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## Act 4 Scene 3

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### SYNOPSIS

Malcolm, initially suspicious that Macduff has been sent by Macbeth, tests Macduff's loyalty by claiming to have a worse character than his father's murderer. When Macduff despairs of finding a true leader to free Scotland, Malcolm reassures him and confesses he was lying. Malcolm briefly praises the English King's ability to cure diseases. Ross arrives and, eventually, informs Macduff of the death of his family. Macduff resolves to revenge them.

### COMMENTS

An unusual first half with Malcolm playing mind games with Macduff. But despite being more philosophical than previous dialogues the stakes are still so high that the conversation can be thrilling to watch. There is further direct flattery of King James I in Malcolm's speech lines 46-159. It was believed the touch of a king could cure scrofula, a form of tuberculosis that caused skin disease. Here we get a more explicit picture of how Macbeth's tyranny is affecting the wider kingdom.

### THEMES

Leadership: Malcolm's trick reveals to us the Elizabethan picture of what qualities a king should and should not have.

Being A Real Man: Malcolm and Macduff seem to have a disagreement about how a man should respond to the murder of his family.

Conscience: What is adding to Macduff's grief?

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

This is a notoriously difficult scene for the actor playing Macduff, how do you convincingly act the horror of hearing the family you left has been killed? Look carefully at the scene to see if you can discover Shakespeare's clues. What two descriptions from Macduff and Ross give us a picture of Macbeth's tyranny?

# ACT 5

As the play reaches its climax the action accelerates with many short scenes 'jump-cutting' between Macbeth's castle and the approaching armies. Lady Macbeth reappears briefly, now a shadow of her former fierceness, and in her hand-washing scene we see a classic symbol of a guilty conscience. The witches also make their presence felt as their enigmatic predictions to Macbeth start to come true, but not in the ways he hoped. As Macbeth's crimes rebound on him will he lose all sense of himself or retain that chilling self-awareness? And how will we feel about this anti-hero, who has behaved so terribly and who we have followed so intimately, as his tragedy draws to its close?

## Act 5 Scene 1

### SYNOPSIS

A doctor and gentlewoman watch as a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth tries to wash blood from her hands.

### COMMENTS

This is the first time we've seen ordinary people, as opposed to Lords, caught up in the effects of the Macbeths' criminality. Shakespeare gives us a bit of time to get acquainted with the doctor and gentlewoman before Lady Macbeth appears.

### THEMES

Conscience/ Sleep/ Guilt: Like her husband Lady Macbeth's guilt won't let her sleep. Lady Macbeth is symbolically trying to cleanse herself of a sin that cannot be 'washed away'.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

The stage picture of Lady Macbeth herself, as well as what she says, has become a classic image of a guilty mind.

## Act 5 Scene 2

### SYNOPSIS

Scottish noblemen, including Lennox, discuss the approach of Malcolm and the English army and hear how Macbeth is preparing for their arrival.

### THEMES

Nature Out Of Joint: Both Caithness and Angus describe how Macbeth's tyranny has unleashed forces that he is finding it hard to control.

Being A Real Man: The unbearded youths of the armies feel that they can now call themselves men.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

There are several references to medicine which echo the Doctor's presence in the previous scene. How does Angus convey how he feels about Macbeth's claim to be a king?

## Act 5 Scene 3

### SYNOPSIS

Dismissing reports of his supporters leaving him, Macbeth reflects briefly on his actions before resolving to continue fighting. He urges the Doctor to find a cure for his wife.

### COMMENTS

Macbeth is now in confident but rueful isolation, bullying his servants and, for want of any real friends, confiding in a lowly doctor, who would prefer to be anywhere else.

### THEMES

Conscience/ Guilt: Macbeth is aware enough to list what he has lost by his actions and the poor substitutes he must tolerate.

Macbeth still hopes the Doctor can cure Lady Macbeth by removing her memories. Leadership: In his isolation Macbeth's bravery has turned to bullying.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

How many ways does Macbeth call the servant cowardly? What brief but brutal image of tyranny is made when Macbeth asks for more horses? How does this reflect on modern totalitarian governments and their attitude to dissent?

## Act 5 Scene 4

### SYNOPSIS

Malcolm and his allies meet. He suggests they disguise their numbers by having each soldier cut off a branch from Birnam Wood and hide behind it. The older soldiers counsel against becoming over-confident until they have actually defeated Macbeth.

### COMMENTS

A brief view of Malcolm, Macduff and their English allies whose main purpose plot wise is to show us how one of the witches prophecies will be fulfilled. Notice how even in this short scene Shakespeare sets up a tension between the more and less experienced soldiers.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Siward wants to make a strong point about the need for action. What does Shakespeare do to give his words an air of finality?

## Act 5 Scene 5

### SYNOPSIS

Macbeth prepares for a siege and realises he has been free of fear for a while. When he hears of Lady Macbeth's death he reflects on the emptiness of life. But then he hears that Birnam Wood is moving towards the Castle and decides to die fighting.

### COMMENTS

Again there are huge emotional changes for Macbeth in a short scene. He moves from confidence at the start to grief and despair on hearing of his wife's death. This is quickly followed by terror when the impossible prediction of a walking wood comes true. The scene finishes with a bullish resolution to face whatever comes. Maybe one of the reasons Macbeth has become such a famous anti-hero is the awareness he carries throughout, as though he were reporting back from the dark side of ourselves so we don't have to go there.

### THEMES

Dehumanising Ambition: Macbeth paints a vivid and almost nostalgic picture of what it is to be human enough to feel fear. Macbeth's response to his wife's death is a classic description of meaninglessness and despair.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

What does Macbeth compare life to? What does this reveal of his attitude towards it?

## Act 5 Scene 6

### SYNOPSIS

Malcolm and his allies prepare for battle.

### COMMENTS

These very short battle scenes are like cross cuts in modern film, they keep us aware of what else is happening and move the action forward. How do you think the more experienced soldiers feel about taking orders from the inexperienced Malcolm?

## Act 5 Scene 7

### SYNOPSIS

Macbeth, confident he cannot be killed by man or woman born, kills Young Siward, the son of the English commander.

## Act 5 Scene 8

### SYNOPSIS

Macduff searches for Macbeth.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

With all the noise and confusion on stage by now what place might the audience be reminded of?

## Act 5 Scene 9

### SYNOPSIS

Siward tells Malcolm the battle is almost won.

## Act 5 Scene 10

### SYNOPSIS

A bloodthirsty Macbeth is shocked to be told by Macduff that he wasn't 'born of woman'. He stops fighting but, taunted by Macduff, decides to die in combat. Macduff kills him.

### COMMENTS

The confrontation we've been waiting for.

### THEMES

Dehumanising Ambition: Once he hears of Macduff's birth Macbeth feels fear and thinks it a message from a better part of himself.

Is Macbeth's decision to fight: a final sign of bravery? a hint at his former honour? or just the inevitable working out of his aggression?

Being A Real Man: Similar to Macbeth's decision at the start of Act 4 to act without reflection, Macduff doesn't want to dilute his revenge with discussion.

Evils of Equivocation: Macbeth realises the witches have tricked him with their play upon the meaning of 'woman-born'.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

Notice how much blood is mentioned.  
How is Macduff's birth described?  
How does Macduff taunt Macbeth?

## Act 5 Scene 11

### SYNOPSIS

The rest of the allies arrive and Siward hears of his son's death. Macduff enters with Macbeth's head. Malcolm rewards his followers, promises retribution on Macbeth's supporters and announces the beginning of his reign.

### COMMENTS

Even at the triumphant end, we are reminded of the loss of Siward's son. Siward responds like a soldier; it would be interesting to speculate what his mother would have said. Malcolm ends the play with the reassertion of moral order, though some productions have hinted his rule may not be much better.

### THEMES

Being A Real Man: Siward's son is said to have achieved manhood by being killed in battle. Siward rejects Malcolm's suggestion he grieve more and says a reputation for bravery is enough.

Conscience/ Guilt: We learn that Lady Macbeth killed herself from an aside by Malcolm. We are a long way from her dominance at the start of the play.

### LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

There is a measured pace to Malcolm's final speech which contrasts with the breathless and jagged rhythms of the last few scenes. It can be played to have a calming effect. How does Shakespeare do this?

# CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In 1603, two years before the play was written, Queen Elizabeth the First died after an unusually long reign. For years the English court had feared that the loss of this royal figurehead would cause civil war but in the event the title passed peacefully to her nearest relation James VI of Scotland who then became James I of England. Consequently there's a mood of relief in the air with fresh blood on the throne in the form of a liberal King famous for his love of the arts. The influential King James Bible was born in this era. Shakespeare's troupe became known as The King's Men when they received James's patronage and thus reached the highest status and security possible in the theatre world of the time.

There's also less persecution of the Catholics whom Elizabeth had thought were treasonous and so pursued vengefully. But this tolerance reverses in 1604 with the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, a plan by several aristocratic Catholics to stage a coup by blowing up the King and Parliament. One of the gang, Guy Fawkes, was discovered guarding the explosions in cellars under the building and the burning of him in effigy is still celebrated every 5th November in England on Bonfire Night. In fact he gets off lightly nowadays because the real Fawkes and his fellow conspirators were hung, drawn and quartered, a gruesome form of execution that used to attract huge crowds.

This barbaric punishment reflects how seriously people considered the attempt to murder a king. The monarchy was believed to be appointed by God (maybe the nearest equivalent we have today is the choosing of a new Pope), so to kill a king was to directly attack God. So for Macbeth to kill Duncan is more than an act of political ambition; it symbolizes his allegiance to the devil.

Europe was still in the grip of the Witch Craze - a fear of black magic and those that practiced it that lasted a couple of hundred years. Tens of thousands of, mainly, women were accused of having unnatural powers granted them by the devil and were murdered by their own communities. There were Witches Commissions travelling the country at the time Macbeth was written and in 1604 a law was passed condemning those who trafficked with the devil.

Such a law isn't surprising given how obsessed King James was with witchcraft. He wrote a book about it, *Daemonologie*, which, while denying witches had supernatural powers, said their chief skill was to cast doubt into the mind of God-fearing Christians. He also said their love of trickery meant their predictions are always ambiguous (reflected in the play's theme of equivocation) and their chief goal was to kill God's representative on earth, i.e. the king. In fact James himself presided over the examination and torture of a group of witches in North Berwick who 'confessed' to seeking to kill him.

The play is also a flattering spin on Scottish history, which shows how keen The King's Men were to please their new patron. It distorts Shakespeare's original source, Holinshed's historical *Chronicles*, by making Banquo condemn Macbeth's actions. In the original story Banquo was a co-conspirator with Macbeth. The real Macbeth proved to be a popular and capable king who ruled for ten years and went on pilgrimage with his wife.

# ACTING SHAKESPEARE

## SHAKESPEARE IS SO TIRING. YOU NEVER GET A CHANCE TO SIT DOWN UNLESS YOU'RE A KING.

ACTRESS JOSEPHINE HULL

Firstly take a look at the extract from Act 1, Scene 7. Ask yourself what makes it dramatic, what keeps us interested and how it might look on stage.

The story so far... By now Lady Macbeth believes her husband is behind her plan to kill King Duncan. But at the feast honouring Duncan's visit Macbeth rudely disappears. Outside the dining hall we see him struggle with his conscience and decide not to go ahead with the murder. Then Lady Macbeth walks in...

### Act 1, Scene 7

#### MACBETH

How now, what news?

#### LADY MACBETH

He has almost supp'd. Why have you left the chamber?

#### MACBETH

Hath he ask'd for me?

#### LADY MACBETH

Know you not he has?

#### MACBETH

We will proceed no further in this business:  
He hath honor'd me of late, and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.

#### LADY MACBETH

Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?,  
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
At what it did so freely? From this time  
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard  
To be the same in thine own act and valour  
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would',  
Like the poor cat 'i' the adage?

#### MACBETH

Prithee, peace!  
I dare do all that may become a man;  
Who dares do more is none.

#### LADY MACBETH

What beast was't then  
That made you break this enterprise to me?  
When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,  
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both;  
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now  
Does unmake you. I have given suck and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me-  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dash'd the brains out had I so sworn  
As you have done to this.

#### MACBETH

If we should fail?

#### LADY MACBETH

We fail!  
But screw your courage to the sticking-place  
And we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep  
Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey  
Soundly invite him- his two chamberlains  
Will I with wine and wassail so convince  
That memory, the warder of the brain,  
Shall be a fume and the receipt of reason  
A limbeck only. When in swinish sleep  
Their drenched natures lie as in a death,  
What cannot you and I perform upon  
The unguarded Duncan? What not put upon  
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt  
Of our great quell?

#### MACBETH

Bring forth men-children only!  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males. Will it not be received,  
When we have mark'd with blood those sleepy two  
Of his own chamber and used their very daggers,  
That they have done't?

#### LADY MACBETH

Who dares receive it other,  
As we shall make our griefs and clamor roar  
Upon his death?

#### MACBETH

I am settled and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.  
Away, and mock the time with fairest show:  
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

IN THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS we're going to look at how drama is made and how this can help us deepen our understanding of the play. It's worth repeating that the original point of Shakespeare's plays was to be performed, not studied and analysed like poems.

As you can see Shakespeare does use 'heightened' language - a way of speaking which is unusually structured and sometimes complex - but this doesn't mean the acting has to be unrealistic. It's like those moments in your own life when the stakes are high and you surprise yourself by how articulate you can be. A play is full of those moments.

To start with we'll look at the fundamental building block of drama – the scene.

# MAKING DRAMA – SCENES

## BASIC SCENE STRUCTURE

When writers think up stories for RTE's 'Fair City' they are told to remember every scene has to contain conflict between what two or more people want, and a 'turn', meaning how this conflict somehow changes them. The writers also have to make sure that scenes before the ad break have a 'hook', an event which will make you stay for the second half, and the episode finishes with a 'cliff-hanger', something so dramatic you'll have to watch the next episode to find out what happens. Even video games have a natural sense of scenes – one episode ends and a new one begins, usually when some obstacle has been overcome.

Shakespeare's plays are built on the same principles. In our example of Act 1, Scene 7 Macbeth decides to call off the plan to kill King Duncan while Lady Macbeth wants him to continue with it (conflict). By the end of the scene she has persuaded him (the turn) and he seems to look at her with new eyes. For her the change is more subtle, maybe she has lost some respect for him; she never addresses him with the intimate form 'thou' for the rest of the play.

Conflict can also be internal – most of Shakespeare's soliloquies (when a character speaks alone on stage) involve someone trying to persuade themselves of something or understand what's happening to them. Soliloquies are like mini-scenes with conflict and change all in one speech. All drama, all stories really, keep our attention by letting us see how the characters change and are changed by events.

Every scene can be analysed in this way. If what happens in a scene isn't moving the story forward we'll soon lose interest. But if there no conflict and no change then storytelling will start to feel a bit obvious and mechanical, like badly written soaps. Well-crafted writing achieves other things in a scene such as:

- INTRODUCING CHARACTER
- DEVELOPING CHARACTER
- CREATING SUSPENSE
- GIVING INFORMATION
- CREATING ATMOSPHERE
- DEVELOPING THEMES

In fact the opening scenes of plays have to do most of these in the first few minutes. Take a look at the first two scenes of *Macbeth* and list how much we get to know about that world and those involved before we even meet the title character.

In Act 1, Scene 7 we get a clearer sense of Lady Macbeth's drive to succeed, her resourcefulness in the face of obstacles and the fact she once had children herself. We see Macbeth's fears, his pride, his admiration for his wife and his dependence on her reassurance. We also experience the atmosphere of their relationship and are reminded of several themes and motifs like ruthless ambition, sleep and being a real man.

## “GET IN LATE, GET OUT EARLY”

Audiences enjoy being given just enough information to see how the story is advancing but not too much, so they get to fill in the gaps themselves. The most involving scenes start late in the action and finish before it's all tied up. So if your story involves an argument, start it in full flow. If you need your main character to visit some witches, don't show his journey there. Of course if the build up to the argument or the journey is important then it has a place but the danger is to put too much in. Which is why, when someone is telling a story badly, we tend to say 'Get on with it!' It's the same with endings. Once the audience has got the main point you can leave the consequences to their imagination; after Lady Macbeth has persuaded him to continue with the murder we don't follow Macbeth into the chamber.

So how do actors make these scenes come alive? If they simply recited the words we'd get bored very quickly. It's one of the great secrets of the theatre that the words aren't the highest priority, it's what you do to each with them that counts.

# PRECISE PERFORMING – ACTIONING

When Lady Macbeth asks "Was the hope drunk/ Wherein you dressed yourself?" she is asking a simple question, which means roughly "Were you sincere when you committed to this plan?" But is she trying to shame Macbeth, to inspire him, to ridicule him or to seduce him? The same line can be played with different 'actions'.

'Actions' are best expressed by transitive verbs. This means doing words that can have an object, like Banquo intimidates Macbeth, Malcolm unnerves Macduff, Macduff reprimands the Porter. The actor needs to think very specifically about what's happening moment to moment and to have a detailed sense of the different ways people can sway one another.

Deciding what your character wants to do in any given moment will be influenced by their larger objective. So in our example Lady Macbeth wants Macbeth to murder Duncan but she has a whole scene in which to do this. It makes for very boring theatre if every action is 'persuades'. In fact some words never make interesting actions, like 'informs', 'tells', 'asks'.

A quick look at the language of the scene would seem to show that Lady Macbeth criticises, threatens, goads, reassures, inspires. But even here there is room for creativity and many actors play against the meaning of the words. So the lines 'Was the hope drunk/ Wherein you dressed yourself?' sound like criticism. But imagine the line played with

the action of 'seduces' or 'teases'. This adds layers to what we see. As in life, the actress playing Lady Macbeth will come up with a variety of strategies to get what she wants. We often choose quite roundabout ways of dealing with people and seeing this sort of detail in someone's acting can make it much more dynamic.

You can try this with the simplest scenes – a couple preparing breakfast, a boss asking someone to do some work, people waiting at a bus stop. The trick is to have an overall idea of what you want and then choose strong intentions behind each line. Compare this with trying to play a mood – the boss is angry – and you'll see how boring generalised acting can be.

(For another discussion of this technique look at our Resource Pack for *The Playboy of the Western World* in a new version by Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle pp. 39-41)

# ANIMATING THE THEMES

**GOOD DRAMA IS FOR ME MADE UP OF THE THOUGHTS, THE WORDS AND THE GESTURES THAT ARE WRUNG FROM HUMAN BEINGS ON THEIR WAY TO, OR IN, OR EMERGING FROM A STATE OF DESPERATION.**

KENNETH TYNAN

Let's take the themes of Ruthless Ambition and Leadership/Tyranny. They imply Macbeth is in a hierarchy but not at the top. What other circumstances involve hierarchies? He could be in business, or the army. Or maybe the hierarchy is less formal but still there –being part of a football team or in a band.

You could start with the freeze frame technique to investigate these. This involves making a still photograph, as if someone had frozen the action in a scene. How people move or stand in relation to each other can tell you a lot about their relationships. Try doing this in small groups and have those not performing try and guess the relationships and thoughts of the participants. Then have each character speak their thoughts aloud. You can go further by making clear the difference between what they are thinking and what they are feeling.

Here are some scenarios:

<b>Business</b>	Macbeth is at the press launch of a company which has just opened new offices on the quays. He thinks he could do a better job than his boss.
<b>Army</b>	Macbeth and some fellow captains are in Iraq. Their general is sound but unimaginative. Macbeth has a reputation for daring.
<b>Football Team</b>	In the dressing room after a match. The game hasn't gone well and the players are secretly blaming the captain who some think is past it.
<b>A Band</b>	Macbeth is the songwriter but isn't as good looking as the lead singer who everyone loves because he's a charmer. Macbeth thinks the band could win a nationwide competition but they'll have to work a lot harder.

Now think of the situations of the other characters, for example -

Lady Macbeth is the more ambitious wife of a capable husband. She believes in his talent but thinks he's too soft.

Lady Macduff's husband works for the government. He thinks his job is more important than his family.

Malcolm has inherited power which he's not sure he's ready for. He's inexperienced and surrounded by older more confident people.

# SETTING UP AN IMPROVISATION

Once you have an idea of who the characters in your scene are and what they want (remember 'actioning' from our section on Acting Shakespeare?) you can try improvising the freeze frame.

Improvising can sometimes end up feeling messy and competitive. If you follow the following ground rules you should find it flows easily:

**Let yourselves be changed by each other.** Really notice what the other characters are saying and doing and allow your character to be affected by that. Stories move through change not stubbornness.

**Run with what you're given.** If the other actor starts pretending it's raining then build on that. This is the principle of 'accepting' it's like saying 'Yes and then this' to everything that happens.

**Let the story emerge between you, don't try and make it happen.** This is the same idea from a different angle. Don't try and impose your story on the scene, the story is bigger than it's individual elements. This is part of the magic of drama, if you play your part something will happen

Once you have found a scene that seems to be working you might want to refine it. You can apply some of the ideas we suggested in the Making A Scene section and the following:

**Try reducing the words.** We nearly always say too much. Art is a condensation of life that looks realistic. If we reproduced how people actually behaved we'd sound very boring. Your first improvisation will give you a sense of the main conflicts, relationships and movements of your scene. Now try and halve the words. Then try and halve them again.

**Talk afterwards about what happened,** what it felt like. You'll not only get better at this skill by reflecting on it but concentrating on what you felt will give you an insight into the characters.

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# ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE

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**M**any directors choose to set the play in times and/or places that are more familiar to modern audiences. It's a way of reminding us how relevant the play's themes are to today.

For example in 2004 there was a famous production of *Macbeth* by the English company Out of Joint which relocated the play to Africa, made Lady Macbeth a white aid worker who had married the Sudanese war lord Macbeth, and had the children (Fleance, Donalbain, young Macduff) play child soldiers in other scenes. The director Max Stafford-Clark had been planning on commissioning a new play about the disturbing violence reported from African civil wars when he realised Shakespeare had already captured that brutality in *Macbeth*.

Adaptations can reveal different sides to the story. In Orson Welles's film version (1948) he invents a new character of a priest to contrast Macbeth's 'pagan' choices. He also has Macbeth drinking heavily from the time he becomes King, emphasising the intoxication of power and how drunkenly he handles it. It's a very theatrical film;

some of the acting is bigger than we're used to on screen but worth looking at for the expressionistic sets and Welles' compassionate central performance.

A more recent and radical adaptation (*Macbeth, Shakespeare Retold* by Peter Moffat, BBC, 2006) updated the story and set it in a top London restaurant with Joe Macbeth as a chef, his wife as the Maître d'. and the witches as mysterious bin men. It sounds bizarre but it captured the theme of ambition from the original by choosing a world which is full of high pressure with the possibility of fame and fortune.

Another interesting version is *Macbeth on the Estate* (Penny Woolcock, BBC 1997) that keeps (and adds to) the original language but sets it amongst drug dealers on a London housing estate. You can find more information here: [www.imdb.com/title/tt0289295/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0289295/) and clips on YouTube.

In the following interview we talk to Jimmy Fay, the director of our production, and ask him how he plans to make the play relevant to contemporary audiences.

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## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JIMMY FAY

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE *MACBETH*?

I've always loved Shakespeare. The first thing I directed was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the mechanicals section, and it went really well. When the opportunity arose to suggest a few plays to Fiach Mac Conghail (the director of the Abbey Theatre) we agreed on *Macbeth* because I love the politics in the play, it's the politics of paranoia. No one really suggests to him he has to kill the king then he goes and kills the king. I also identified with the main character. Okay, he's an anti-hero but I can kind of see where he's coming from.

I've seen *Macbeth* more often than any other play. I've seen about eighteen productions. It's always thrilled me, every time, from school productions to whatever.

### CAN YOU SAY A BIT MORE ABOUT *MACBETH* AS A CHARACTER? YOU CALL HIM AN ANTI-HERO AND HE'S ALSO REALLY EXCITING. HOW DOES THAT WORK? IS HE EVIL? ARE WE MEANT TO LIKE HIM?

It's interesting *Macbeth* is sometimes used to suit the time. In the 19th century it was all supernatural spirits but post World War II, when we realised evil was in people, it's a very useful play for seeing this too.

I mean what does Macbeth do wrong? He kills a king but other characters have done that. I think you have to look at what was going on at the time to see what sort of significance he might have had.

Queen Elizabeth has just died and James I comes along and suddenly you have the strong male for the first time since Henry VIII. So basically, apart from how they talked about Elizabeth, men still saw women as weak. The Puritan spirit was also rising, part of which was that theatre was impure and that people in general weren't pure enough. And I think Shakespeare was reflecting this. His plays from the turn of the century got a little darker. *Macbeth* is like a revenge thriller; there is something very dynamic about it.



So Shakespeare was seeing certain things coming into play - the police state, philosophical changes and more political machinations. In my head, and this is complete speculation, I think he foresaw Cromwell, who, of course, was only forty years later. In Ted Hughes's *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Hughes mentions that when Cromwell was four, which was about the time that *Macbeth* was being written, he had a dream that he would become king. Cromwell told his master and he got beaten for it. The only person in British history who has killed a king was Cromwell and he changed the landscape forever after that.

Also around Cromwell there were people like the Levellers, and other movements of a socialist bent. There was a theme in the air of the Common Man. In contrast to this Charles I had this idea that the King was God. I was thinking *Macbeth* is doing something in the light of this political shift. Maybe that's the context in which he thinks he's doing the right thing.

So my production is looking at a Cromwellian period, kind of in Ireland. But I'm not trying to be completely true to the period. We just have to suggest this in the costumes and this can give the sense that then and now exist beside each other.

I think the 1600s onwards were as paranoid as the last ten years have been here.

## **HOW ARE YOU GOING TO MAKE THE WITCHES FRIGHTENING?**

I think one of the things that's frightening are people themselves, rather than people going 'Whooh!' I think human beings are genuinely frightening, when you look at them. And witches actually existed, there were people practicing witchcraft. And it's what these weird sisters, as women not ghosts; it's what they put into play that will be frightening. Basically I want the actors to play them as very forceful, very dynamic women. They're more interesting and frightening as real people rather than as otherworldly spirits.

## **IS THIS A PLAY ABOUT LOSS OF HUMANITY?**

And about when you achieve what you want, you get hollowed out. At the end there's all those great speeches about 'Tomorrow and tomorrow...'. It's as if he hasn't felt anything for a long time and suddenly her death or suicide prompts a response. It's a memory maybe more than an actual emotion. So, yes, he does get dehumanised.

But remember the worst thing he does, worse than killing Duncan, worse than killing Banquo - that's a real Godfather thing he does, like in *Godfather 2* when Michael kills his brother Fredo? - the worst thing he does is slaughter Macduff's family. Yet when he's confronted by Macduff, *Macbeth* says I cannot fight you "my soul is too much charged/ With blood of thine already." So there's something there, some weird, noble, honour thing has remained, however perverted. I don't think he's triumphant in that moment.

## **WHAT DOES A DIRECTOR DO?**

It's difficult to summarise. There are as many different directors as there are actors. You have directors like John Dexter, who did *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, who staged things very elaborately but didn't seem to care much about the actors' process. And then you've got directors who were very good with actors, like Eli Kazan, who got in there with the actors, pushed them forward and helped them find their way to create that role. Then there are people like Peter Brook and everything becomes organic. He talks about it like guiding, as if you're in a ship.

Which I quite like. I quite like the idea that you're searching for a way into the jungle and then out of the jungle. Because texts are very strange, people come at them in different ways. What you try and do is keep everybody's creativity going in the room - your own as much as everybody else's. I don't believe directors should just sit back and allow everybody else to create. It's about helping people find the key. The directors' main job is to keep everybody in as fertile, as open-to-suggestion a state as possible.

## **HOW DO YOU WORK WITH YOUR ACTORS?**

I like actors who are open and are willing to try something. Some actors don't give much in the rehearsal room and save it all for the performance. I prefer to have it all out in the rehearsal room.

Acting is an extraordinary profession, very difficult, very emotionally wearing. Because you are basically surrendering a part of yourself to get this character. So you are changing your shape a little bit.

There always has to be discussion. I mean I'd never work with a designer who just went away then brought back a set and said, 'This is it'. It's the same with actors. There has to be a fluid conversation going on.

## **SO THE ACTORS WILL CHANGE THIS PRODUCTION OF *MACBETH*?**

Yes but also part of the creative process is casting. Nowadays I'm taking more and more time to cast something. I mean in this one I've got Aidan Kelly (as *Macbeth*) and Eileen Walsh (as *Lady Macbeth*) and I've worked with them a good bit over the last six years. And they're both at the top of the game.

## **SO, IS PARANOIA GOING TO BE A MAJOR THEME OF YOUR PRODUCTION?**

Paranoia is a major theme of most of the things I do. I think the paranoia's in there, it depends how much you want to bring it out. With *Macbeth* he has that very strong relationship with Banquo that fizzles out due to the fact he hears Banquo's son is going to become king. He has a sort of strange distant relationship with Macduff and then there's the one with his wife, which disintegrates.

## **AND WHY IS THERE MUCH LESS OF *LADY MACBETH* IN THE SECOND HALF?**

It's different reactions to the events. He sees the consequences of his actions and she either blinkers it (or doesn't, depending on how we decide to do it). And then from the banquet scene onwards she begins to disintegrate because she sees this wasn't such a good thing to do. Which is interesting because that's guilt and that's a different thing to what he has. He's had guilt at the beginning, or he's had the thought that 'This could be guilt' but he goes somewhere else with it. So that drives them apart, they're not quite as in union as they thought they were.

## **HOW IS THE PLAY RELEVANT TO TODAY?**

When you do a bad, bad thing it comes back and kicks you. I don't mean it's a morality tale. It's the dynamic of the play because people will do the wrong thing because they think they're doing the right thing. And this play shows you've got to be a bit nobler than that, to put it very simplistically. The *Macbeths* know it's wrong but they do it to achieve what they think is best for him and then things get progressively worse after that. I think that theme is always relevant. Also lust for power is constant and it's almost always a destructive lust.

And again it's the paranoia; the constant terror that's underneath things, that I think is as relevant now as ever. I think most people are steeped in some sort of paranoia. It's part of being in the world. Because what is paranoia? It's thinking people are going to get you and it's true. Because most people are trying to get one over on you whether they mean it or not. It may not be destructive but it's there. It's part of our DNA.

## **DID YOU SEE SHAKESPEARE WHEN YOU WERE A TEENAGER?**

I saw *Macbeth* when I was about fifteen. It was amazing. There were about five people in the cast and it was in a school hall. People were laughing and everything and yet I still remembered a lot of it. It wasn't the best production but it was dynamic. You've got to see it live ●

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# BIOGRAPHY

Phil Kingston spent ten years running drama and storytelling workshops in schools in Northern England. He has trained teachers in the use of drama in the classroom and designed educational materials for children aged between seven and eighteen. He has taught improvisation, storytelling and acting to adults. He now lives in Dublin where he works as an actor and writer. He designed, delivered and wrote resource packs for three Abbey Theatre 'Theatre As Resource' projects – *Julius Caesar*, *The Playboy of the Western World* in a new version by Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle (with Helen Blackhurst and Aoife Lucey) and *The Brothers Size*. In 2008, he wrote and performed a one man show on Shakespeare called *The Common Will not Law* which was nominated for the Dublin Fringe Bewleys Café Theatre Award.



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