



Druid

MACBETH

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RESOURCE
PACK

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SYNOPSIS

Note: this is a synopsis is of Druid's 2025 production of *Macbeth* rather than the printed text of the play- as such it reflects the omission of the character of Hecate and also acknowledges some of the performance choices the company made.



First Half

On a turf floor three dark hooded figures watch over a dead body wrapped up in red canvas. The atmosphere is eerie – shrieks and drumbeats (or heart beats?) fill the air. Nothing is what it seems. These Weird Sisters agree to reconvene on the heath to meet Macbeth.

Meanwhile King Duncan is receiving reports on the outbreak of multiple rebellions within his country. Duncan's army, led by Macbeth, is proved the victor despite the rebels being aided by Norway. The remaining traitor will be executed and messengers are dispatched to tell Macbeth that he is to be rewarded and made Thane of Cawdor.

Returning home from battle Macbeth and his friend Banquo are met by the Weird Sisters who promise greatness in the form of 'Thane of Cawdor' and 'King hereafter' to Macbeth, while they claim the jealous Banquo will be 'father to a line of kings'. The figures disappear and the King's messengers arrive announcing Macbeth's promotion and calling him back to the court. Macbeth shares his amazement with us in a soliloquy and weighs up the possibilities for becoming King as was promised.

On their arrival before Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo are met with praise but also with the announcement that Malcolm, the King's son, has been named as his successor, a block in Macbeth's way, as he sees it. The King also intends to visit Macbeth's castle and he leaves to prepare.



Back at Inverness Castle Lady Macbeth has received a letter from Macbeth which was sent in the aftermath of the meetings on the heath. She immediately fears that he will not have the resolve to pursue 'what greatness is promised' him. When she is informed that the King is on his way, she calls on spirits to prepare her for the murder of Duncan. Macbeth arrives just before the King allowing her time to share her plan with her husband – he says they 'will speak further' but does not commit.

While Duncan dines, Macbeth weighs up the pros and cons of killing the king. When his wife comes looking for him, he tells her they will not kill Duncan – she berates him, challenges him, and ultimately convinces him to go through with the murder.

In the middle of the night Macbeth runs into an uneasy Banquo and his son Fleance. He sends them all to bed and waits for the signal from his wife to do the killing – inspired by the 'bloody business' he imagines a dagger before him pointing him towards his task. Which, when the bell rings he goes to perform.

Lady Macbeth waits in the shadows for her husband to return, she's on edge – the noises of the night startle her – and though she was in Duncan's chamber with the daggers she could not bring herself to kill him. Her husband arrives, shaken by the act, and what followed when Duncan's sons woke temporarily from their sleep. He already believes he is damned – unable to pray – and hearing cries of 'Sleep no more' around the castle. To follow through on their plan, Lady Macbeth must return the bloody daggers in Macbeth's hand to Duncan's drugged servants – she and Macbeth must also wash themselves clean of the blood and put on their night close so that nothing looks suspicious if they are called. Somewhere else in the castle there's a knocking at the door.



Still drunk from the night before a Porter lets in two of the King's Thanes who have come to wake him for his journey home. Ushered to the room by Macbeth they find the murdered King and wake the house. There is shock and confusion – Macbeth kills the two servants in the sight of one of the Thanes – and all the assembled Thanes agree to hold a conference to discuss what has happened. The King's sons, who have watched this all unfold, decide to flee, fearing for their lives.

Out in the country Ross is waiting to talk with his cousin Macduff (The Thane of Fife), he speaks with a man (a priest perhaps) about the terrible events that have happened overnight. Macduff, who is heading to his home, brings news that suspicion for the murder rests on the King's sons, and that Macbeth has been named King and is heading to Scone to be crowned.

We see Macbeth enter at the heel of his wife and climb a ladder to take the crown off the Christ-like body affixed to the back wall, before handing it to his wife (note that in Druid's production, a larger-than-life crucifix hangs on the back wall). Banquo reflects on Macbeth's rise to power – he fears Macbeth had a hand in events but he also dwells on the prediction that was made to him about his own line. Macbeth engages Banquo in conversation about his plans for the day and reminds him again not to miss the special dinner that night. Once Banquo and his son Fleance depart Macbeth calls two desperate men before him – he claims they have been downtrodden by Banquo and offers them the chance of revenge and opportunity to win his favour by killing Banquo and his son tonight outside the castle. The men agree to this.

Concerned about the behaviour of her husband, Lady Macbeth tries to speak to him – fault lines are already beginning to show – Macbeth will no longer share his plans with who had once been his 'dearest partner in greatness' and we see the balance of power in the relationship has shifted.

Outside the castle three hooded figures wait for Banquo, he is attacked and killed. His son Fleance, in the darkness and confusion, manages to escape.



Second Half

Macbeth presides over an uncomfortable banquet – jugs of ‘wine’ are drawn from the metal barrel he had washed his bloody hands in. Unseen by others the ghost of Banquo appears, confronting Macbeth with his crime. For fear of what he might say in his distressed state, Lady Macbeth dismisses the guests. In the now empty dining room what transpires to be their final conversation is vicious and abusive.

Two of the remaining Thanes reflect on the changed state of affairs, share rumours of Macduff’s flight to England and pray for some aid.

Macbeth returns to the three Weird Sisters to hear more from them – they appear as if in a wasteland huddled round a barrel. Macbeth drinks from the liquid inside and is presented with three premonitions – the announcements are accompanied by rough pictograms, drawn on the set by the sisters. Demanding to know more, Macbeth knocks over the barrel and its contents and the figures in response pin him to the wall where he sees Banquo’s line stretch out for generations, crowned and carrying the insignia of England and Scotland. But then not only do they vanish but the table has reappeared and we seem to be back in the castle – was this real, drug fuelled or given his sleep deprivation, a figment of Macbeth’s imagination? A remaining Thane tells him that Macduff has fled to England and Macbeth responds by planning to kill his wife, children and anyone at his home.



We see Lady Macduff at home with her son making bread. Feeling herself betrayed by her husband's departure, she tries to reason with her cousin Ross. He leaves her saying that her husband knows best. While she talks to her son she gets a warning that they are in danger – followed by the arrival of three murders who demand information about her husband and then kill her and her son.

The action of the play then moves to England where Macduff has travelled to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland to lead an uprising. Unsure of his motives, with justifiable suspicion, Malcolm seeks to test Macduff. When he proves true Malcolm shares news of an English army that he is to lead to Scotland. This good news is tempered by the arrival of Ross who brings tidings of the massacre at Fife. Through his grief Macduff swears revenge.

Back in Dunsinane Castle Lady Macbeth has undergone a massive change – frail and tormented, she sleepwalks, observed by her servant and doctor and then falls asleep on top of the table. (At this stage in the production, the structure of the play begins to blur with scenes melting into each other.) Soldiers approach Dunsinane. Told of this march, Macbeth almost delirious, scoffs at the advance, and then tells Seyton (another of his servants) that he is 'sick at heart' – seeing only a bleak future ahead of him. He quizzes the Doctor about his wife but the Doctor can offer no comfort. The army arrive at Birnam Wood where they plan to camouflage the scale of their force with tree branches. To do so, the actors strip planks of wood from the walls of the set revealing more of the pictograms like those of the Weird Sisters.



Hearing a cry, Macbeth is told of his wife's death. This moment unleashes a wave of killing – he kills his servant who has been with him through the play, then a young soldier from the advancing army which has breached the castle, before finally being confronted by Macduff. The final prediction from the sisters, which says: 'none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth', is turned on its head and Macbeth recognises that he is not invincible. Rather than yield to 'the boy Malcolm' he says he will fight on but he is killed Macduff who then presents the crown to Malcolm. Acknowledging what is due to those who have supported him, Malcolm claims the throne. In the final moments of the production, he climbs the wall with the crown in hand to return it to the head of the Christ figure, the mutilated body that, hung from the back wall of the set has watched over the action of the play.





THEMES

DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL

MACBETH



RELIGION

Religion was a hot button issue in the world in which Shakespeare was writing, under the reign of King James I. Henry VIII had broken from the Church in Rome and the religious divides, mistrust and persecution that his children presided over as Kings and Queens of England did not cease when James came to the throne. Instead matters came to a head in the form of the Gunpowder Plot, where a group of Catholic Englishmen planned to blow up parliament while the King and most of his family was present.

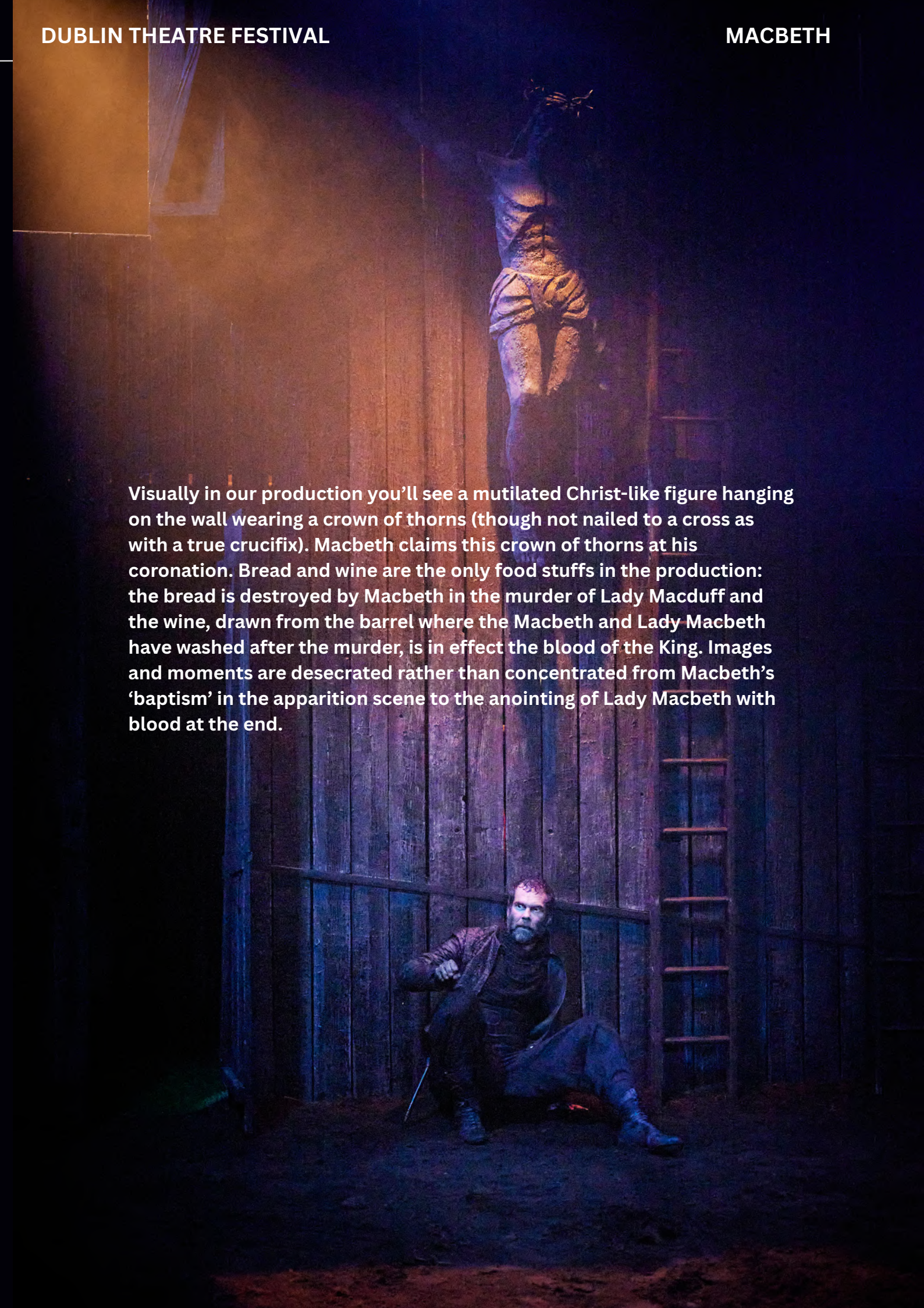
The plot was discovered at almost the last minute so no bomb exploded, but the terror that erupted in the streets of London for what might have been, and as the authorities attempted to round up, try and execute all the conspirators, was very real. Distrust for Catholics, especially Jesuits, massively increased – your average Londoner was being told such an act could only be the work of the devil and these conspirators were therefore his ministers. Equivocation – the ability to publicly deny your Catholic faith in a court, provided you were thinking the truth which God would know – seemed to be Papal-sanctioned lying. Nothing a Catholic said could ever be trusted – they were now the ‘fiend who lies like truth’.



But Catholicism must have had deep roots in the psyche of Shakespeare's audience and perhaps more than that, Shakespeare and his family may have remained adherent to the old faith: his daughter certainly was cited in the court in Stratford Upon Avon for not attending communion at Easter (at a point where religious observance was legally mandated). The 'Old Man' of the printed text who talks to Ross in Act 2 is most likely a Catholic Priest but could not be referred to as such in print. The 'Farmer' the Porter refers to in his speech may be a reference to Father Garnet, the Jesuit priest executed for his part in the Gunpowder Plot, who had been called 'Farmer Garnet' when he had been travelling undercover around the country.

You can see Religion's impact throughout the play text, as you can in Druid's new production. God is frequently invoked as is his opposite – damnation is a threat more real and terrible than anything that can happen in the real world. From the moment of Duncan's murder, Macbeth believes himself changed as he is no longer able to pray. The play travels from here (Macbeth terrified at the prospect of having compromised his eternal soul) all the way to the point where (in our production) Macbeth actively calls on Satan (you'll remember that the script calls him Seyton – but Shakespeare often made use of words that sounded similar to other words and depended on his actors, through their pronunciation of these words, and his audience to create the imaginative connection).



The image shows a theatrical production of Macbeth. In the background, a mutilated, Christ-like figure hangs on a wall, wearing a crown of thorns. The figure is illuminated by a warm, orange light. In the foreground, a man (Macbeth) sits on the floor, looking up at the figure. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket and pants. The floor is dark and appears to be made of dirt or sand. The background wall is made of vertical wooden planks. A wooden ladder is visible on the right side of the wall. The overall atmosphere is dark and dramatic.

Visually in our production you'll see a mutilated Christ-like figure hanging on the wall wearing a crown of thorns (though not nailed to a cross as with a true crucifix). Macbeth claims this crown of thorns at his coronation. Bread and wine are the only food stuffs in the production: the bread is destroyed by Macbeth in the murder of Lady Macduff and the wine, drawn from the barrel where the Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have washed after the murder, is in effect the blood of the King. Images and moments are desecrated rather than concentrated from Macbeth's 'baptism' in the apparition scene to the anointing of Lady Macbeth with blood at the end.

AMBITION AND POWER



Ambition and Power are always things you're going to talk about in relation to this play – but in this production, especially as a consequence of the casting around Macbeth and Lady Macbeth you need to consider where these attributes sit. Marie Mullen is considerably older than Marty Rea – and age disparity in the favour of Lady Macbeth between the actors playing these roles is not without precedent or historical foundation. Additionally we have contemporary reference points for political figures with older partners.

In the production we are asked to question how much of the couple's ambition is Lady Macbeth's, how she strives for the only power available to her in this society – that of being married to a powerful man. We wonder about the life the couple have had together – how long has she been grooming him for this moment? The rhymes and adages that they both repeat feel like those you would teach in childhood: “false face must hide what the false heart doth know”... “come what, come may, time and the hour runs through the roughest day”. And so we start to question if this woman has been all Macbeth has known for most of his life, has she been mother as much as wife, has that impacted the expression of his sexuality? Is long-practised coercive control the reason this couple begin the play with one of the most ‘equitable’ marriages in Shakespeare. But then, what is it that causes the shift in power between them? As Macbeth waits for his opportunity to murder the King, he describes the anticipation or approach to the moment in the guise of the classic figure Tarquin – a rapist rather than a murderer. Is the killing of Duncan then to be seen as a sexual act, as a moment of transformation or rebirth for Macbeth, where in this alternate life path Lady Macbeth is increasingly side-lined and marginalised? Is it then this loss of power and authority which precipitates her collapse, rather than guilt?



DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL

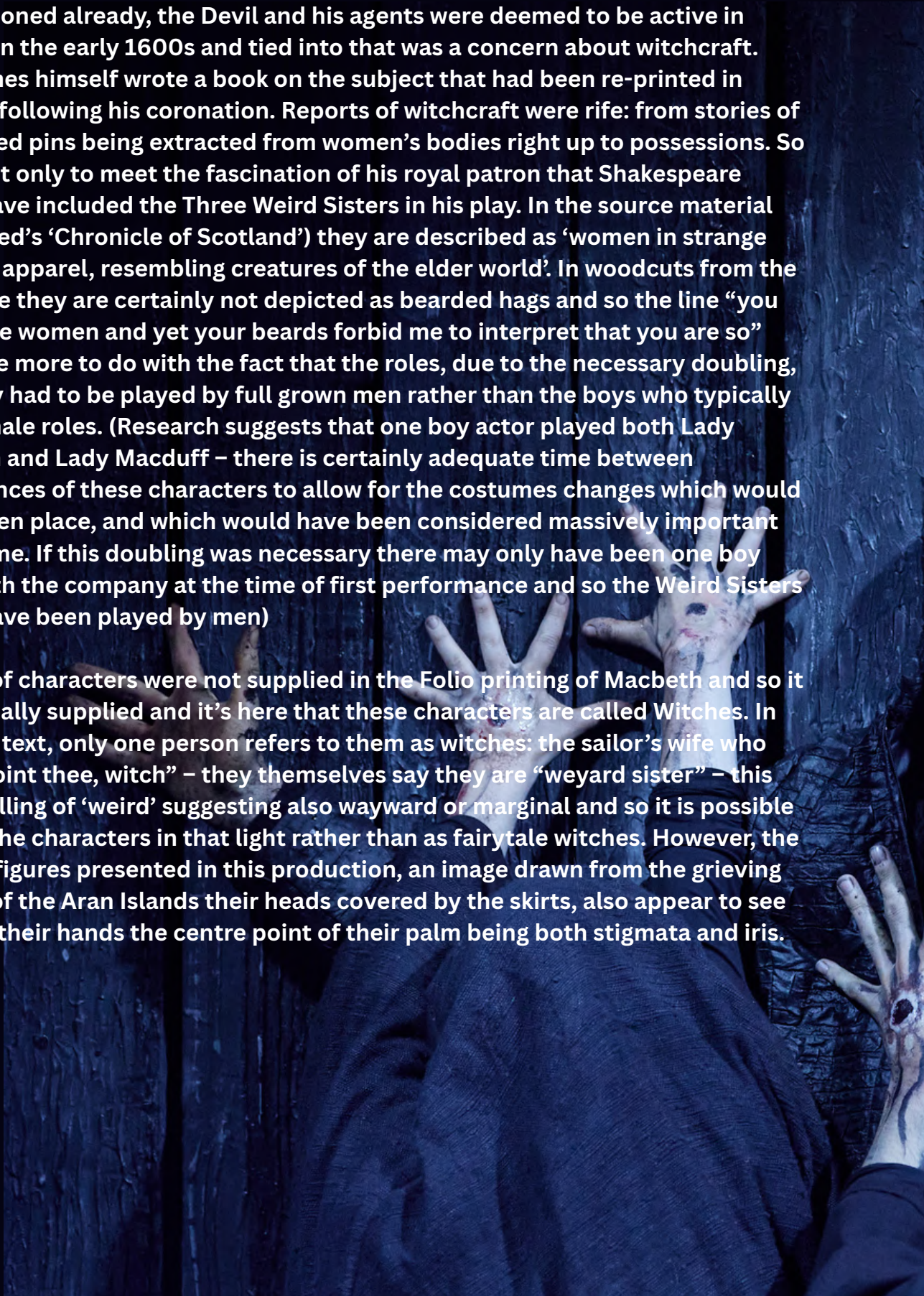
MACBETH

A dramatic, low-key photograph of three figures in dark, hooded robes. They are positioned in a triangular formation, with their hands raised towards the camera. The palms of their hands are smeared with blood, and the figure in the foreground has a visible skull tattoo on their left palm. The background is dark with a faint blue light source, creating a chilling, supernatural atmosphere.

SUPERNATURAL

As mentioned already, the Devil and his agents were deemed to be active in London in the early 1600s and tied into that was a concern about witchcraft. King James himself wrote a book on the subject that had been re-printed in England following his coronation. Reports of witchcraft were rife: from stories of embedded pins being extracted from women's bodies right up to possessions. So it was not only to meet the fascination of his royal patron that Shakespeare would have included the Three Weird Sisters in his play. In the source material (Holinshed's 'Chronicle of Scotland') they are described as 'women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of the elder world'. In woodcuts from the Chronicle they are certainly not depicted as bearded hags and so the line "you should be women and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so" may have more to do with the fact that the roles, due to the necessary doubling, probably had to be played by full grown men rather than the boys who typically took female roles. (Research suggests that one boy actor played both Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff – there is certainly adequate time between appearances of these characters to allow for the costumes changes which would have taken place, and which would have been considered massively important at the time. If this doubling was necessary there may only have been one boy actor with the company at the time of first performance and so the Weird Sisters would have been played by men)

The list of characters were not supplied in the Folio printing of Macbeth and so it is editorially supplied and it's here that these characters are called Witches. In the folio text, only one person refers to them as witches: the sailor's wife who says "Aroint thee, witch" – they themselves say they are "weyard sister" – this folio spelling of 'weird' suggesting also wayward or marginal and so it is possible to view the characters in that light rather than as fairytale witches. However, the hooded figures presented in this production, an image drawn from the grieving women of the Aran Islands their heads covered by the skirts, also appear to see through their hands the centre point of their palm being both stigmata and iris.



Are the Weird Sisters able to tell the future? The knowledge they appear to have in Act 1 Scene 3 – could be rumour (in the case of Cawdor, messengers are travelling to tell Macbeth that he's been promoted) and supposition (in the case of the crown, in a country rife with rebellion a successful and powerful general might easily fancy himself able to overthrow a weak king). In the apparition scene, if, as in this staging nothing supernatural is seen by the audience do we need to consider their information as supernatural? Or are they like fortune tellers – trading in vague platitudes which can be variously interpreted by the hearer?

Obviously this line of thinking is massively helped by the fact that Hecate has been removed from this production along with the dances and songs and other spirits. There is a widely accepted argument for much of this material having been written by Thomas Middleton (some material taken from his own play 'The Witch') and it is on that basis that it is often removed.

Beyond the sisters we can also look to disruptions in nature that the play describes: no stars being out on the night Duncan is murdered, the tremors that were felt in the nearby camp, the unexplained darkness the following day when Ross and the Old Man speak, and the unnatural behaviour of the animals they describe. Can we suppose that these events were believed by the audience of the day to have had a supernatural origin?



APPEARANCE VS REALITY





Equivocation (the use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth) was obviously such a fascinating proposition that Shakespeare not only refers to it directly (in the Porter's speech) but employs the notion of 'lying like truth' throughout. Perhaps the most famous example is the one the end of the play hinges on, that 'none of woman born will harm Macbeth'. Macbeth hears this to mean he is invincible and that no one can harm him but there is a 'get-out clause' that would have been perhaps more readable to an audience at the time. Unlike with modern medicine, in Shakespeare's time the act of cutting a baby from the mother's womb was fatal to the mother. Looking at the gravedigger scene from Hamlet perhaps we get a sense of how people viewed the dead back then. Hamlet asks the gravedigger what man he's digging the grave for and is told 'No man', so Hamlet asks what woman then? And the gravedigger replies 'for no woman either', adding 'for one that was a woman, but rest her soul she's dead'. So Macduff, ripped from his mother's womb, was not therefore born of a woman but of something 'that was a woman, but rest her soul she's dead'.

Beyond what is purely equivocal there is also the weighing of one thing against another – antithesis – which is not to say they are always direct opposites, but more like Shakespeare wants us to hold the separate ideas in our two hands and consider them together: 'What thou wouldst highly, that wouldst thou holily' or 'Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it'.

Shakespeare is also making use of wordplay to continue his exploration of appearance versus reality: Lady Macbeth say Duncan ‘must be provided for’. Of course we can hear this as we should prepare a room for him, get food etc – but we know she means they must work out their plan for his murder.

From the beginning of this play nothing is what it seems: figures who should be women but look like men appear and they are solid but can vanish into the air. But in fact it is even before the play starts that nothing is what it seems: Macdonald and Cawdor should be loyal subjects but instead they are traitors and, in the case of Cawdor, in league with Norway to overthrow the King. Going further in this production, a body that appears to be wrapped in a death shroud reanimates to tell Duncan about the ongoing battle. Even Macbeth says in his first soliloquy that ‘no thing is but what is not’ – we would do well (as would he) to remember that throughout.



GUILT



The Doctor in Act 5 finishes his scene saying ‘God, god forgive us all’ – closely linked to the idea of Religion (certainly if that’s situated in a Catholic rather than Protestant space) is guilt. Again we find it from the beginning of the play: Macbeth says ‘my thought, whose Murder yet is but fantastical / shakes so my single state of man’, thinking about the murder he feels the consequences of it. It is no surprise then that in the aftermath of the killing he’s hearing voices and believes his soul to be damned. Lady Macbeth in her sleepwalking scene gives us the ‘greatest hits’ of her crimes with Macbeth – is it the accumulation or her complicity in the killing of Lady Macduff that she feels guilty about and which has driven her to this state? Certainly the attack on Lady Macduff and her children is different to the other murders because it is an attack on innocence and domesticity. Shakespeare’s audience may have felt that this killing would have caused greater guilt because of a feature of the doubling of roles – it’s highly probable that the boy playing Lady Macbeth would have had to double as Lady Macduff. In a strange way it makes Lady Macbeth’s question ‘The Thane of Fife had a wife, where is she now?’ all the more powerful.

Employing a similar tactic in our production, the actor Liam Heslin, who plays Macduff, portrays the child (Macduff’s own son) in the scene with Lady Macduff – so again in that weird way he somehow gets to experience the murder. When Macduff is confronted with the news of their deaths in the following scene, the guilt that he feels in respect of his actions must surely be enormous – he knows it wasn’t for anything that they did themselves but because of him that they were killed.



Perhaps all of the principle characters in this play feel guilt – it would certainly be reasonable to suggest that none of them are the ‘good guys’. Banquo is often held up as such but has a moral ambiguity – he suspects Macbeth’s actions but he does nothing or says nothing about it. He’s dreaming of the Weird Sisters, and is ambitious for his son and his line. Persuading him to a secret conversation, Macbeth promises that it shall make honour for him, to which Banquo answers: ‘So I lose none / in seeking to augment it, but still keep / my bosom franchised and allegiance clear, / I shall be counselled.’ In these lines, he convinces himself that provided he doesn’t come away looking bad and provided he can have plausible deniability, and if it’s advantageous to him, then he’ll do what Macbeth wants!

Malcolm too, the great hope at the end of the play, may not have the list of sins and crimes he enumerates in the England scene to be guilty about but his actions do not suggest a King of conscience, pure of heart. Here again is an ambiguity and once more we loop back to the idea of nothing being what it seems. Is he bestowed with kingly graces or is he in fact a political operator happy to exploit people for his own ends?



DISCUSSION POINTS

- What is the ramification of the age difference between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth? When Macbeth says 'no son of mine succeeding' it has a particular flavour in our production. This Lady Macbeth could not give him a son so does he consider killing and replacing her? Or does she remain vital to him till the end and, if so, then why?
- Is Macduff right to leave his family behind in Fife to go to England and try to convince Malcolm to return? Is the sacrifice of his wife and children justifiable?
- Is Macbeth's loyalty to Duncan at the top of the play misplaced? Duncan's reign is being challenged by rebellion and foreign invasion and he moves to put his underqualified son in line for the throne. Would Macbeth make a better King?
- What does the symbolism of birds mean in the play? There are frequent references to them throughout. We hear them as part of the soundscape, but they are also mentioned as part of the storytelling.
- Is prophecy real in the world of Macbeth or do his actions shape his destiny?



Macbeth Audio Interviews

Listen to a three-episode audio interview series with the creative team of Druid's five-star production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

The creative team members interviewed include Francis O'Connor (Set and Co-Costume Designer), Clíodhna Hallissey (Co-Costume Designer), Colin Grenfell (Lighting Designer) and Conor Linehan (Composer).

The series is hosted and produced by Lianne O'Shea, Assistant Director of *Macbeth* and the 2025 recipient of Druid's Marie Mullen Bursary.

The series is available free to all teachers and students as part of Druid's Community and Education programme which is generously supported by the Adrian Brinkerhoff Poetry Foundation.

If you have queries regarding Druid's Community and Education programme, please email office@druid.ie.

LISTEN HERE



CAST



CAITRÍONA ENNIS



EMMET FARRELL



LIAM HESLIN



SEÁN KEARNS



GARRETT LOMBARD



PATTIE MAGUIRE



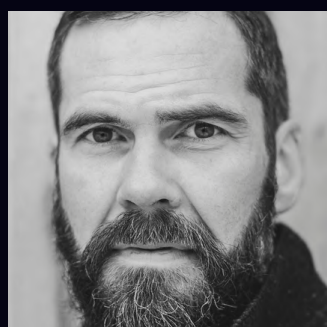
MARIE MULLEN



RORY NOLAN



RACHEL O'BYRNE



MARTY REA



CATHAL RYAN

Production photography by Ros Kavanagh
Rehearsal photography by Ste Murray
Promotional image by Gareth Jones

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DUBLIN THEATRE
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2025
