

Director's Note
(Time, Place & Setting)

Our Macbeth is the story of an 11th century king, told by a 17th century Elizabethan poet, produced by a contemporary American high school theatre company. For the plot Shakespeare drew loosely on the historical account of King Macbeth of Scotland by Raphael Holinshed and that by the Scottish philosopher Hector Boece. What inspired me for our production was the idea of using the text of Shakespeare, of setting the play in contemporary surroundings and of examining to what extent the themes of ambition, hubris, war, politics, patriotism and power resonate today.

SYNOPSIS

Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, is one of King Duncan's greatest war captains. Upon returning from a battle with the rebellious Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth and Banquo encounter three witches. A prophecy is given to them: Macbeth is hailed as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King; Banquo is hailed as the father of kings to come. With that, the witches evaporate into the mists. Both men nervously laugh off the prophecies until Ross informs Macbeth that he is to assume Cawdor's title as a reward for his service to the king. When Lady Macbeth is informed of the events, she determines to push her husband's resolve in the matter—she wants him to take his fate into his own hands and make himself king. If Duncan happens to be inconveniently in the way...

Macbeth at first is reluctant to do harm to Duncan. However, when Duncan makes arrangements to visit the castle, the opportunity presents itself too boldly to ignore. Pressed on by his wife, they plot Duncan's death. Lady Macbeth gets Duncan's attendants drunk; Macbeth will slip in with his dagger, kill the king, and plant the dagger on the drunken guards. Macbeth, in a quiet moment alone, imagines he sees a bloody dagger appear in the air; upon hearing the tolling bells, he sets to work. Immediately Macbeth feels the guilt and shame of his act, as does Lady Macbeth, who nonetheless finds the inner strength to return to Duncan's chamber to plant the dagger on the attendants when Macbeth refuses to go back in there. When the body is discovered, Macbeth immediately slays the attendants—he says out of rage and grief—in order to silence them. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, both flee Scotland (fearful for their own lives). To everyone else, it appears that the sons have been the chief conspirators, and Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland, thus fulfilling the witches' prophecy. Banquo, however, has suspicions of his own based on their encounter with the witches.

Macbeth knows of Banquo's suspicions and the reasons for them; he is also wary of the second prophecy concerning Banquo's offspring. As he prepares for a celebratory banquet on his coronation, Macbeth hires assassins to get rid of Banquo and Fleance, his son. Banquo is murdered that night, but Fleance escapes into the darkness. As Macbeth sits down to the feast, the bloody ghost of Banquo silently torments him, which causes him great despair. Meanwhile, Macduff has fled to England because he too suspects Macbeth of foul play. Macbeth, once a man of greatness, transforms into a man whose conscience has fled him. Upon learning of Macduff's flight, Macbeth exacts revenge by having Macduff's entire household butchered. Macduff grieves, but joins up with Malcolm in England to raise an army against Macbeth.

Macbeth is given another prophecy by the witches as he prepares for Malcolm's assault. His throne is safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and he will not die by the hand of any man born of a woman. Macbeth feels confident in his chances for victory at this pronouncement. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, has been slowly driven mad by her dreams in the wake of killing Duncan. She sleepwalks, wringing her hands together, and inadvertently reveals her part in the murder. As the English armies approach, Macbeth learns that many of his lords are deserting him, and that Lady Macbeth has died. On top of this, a messenger brings news that Malcolm's army is approaching under the cover of boughs, which they have cut from the trees of Birnam Wood. Resigned now to his fate, Macbeth grimly sets to battle.

None, however, can bring Macbeth down. Finally, Macduff meets him on the field of battle. Macbeth laughs hollowly, telling him of the witches' prophecy: no man born of a woman may slay him. As Macduff retorts, he was "from my mother's womb untimely ripp'd," meaning he was delivered by a Caesarian section (and hence, not technically born of a woman). Grimly, Macbeth presses on. The play ends with the death of Macbeth; Macduff greets the others bearing Macbeth's head. Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland, restoring his father's bloodline to the throne.

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MACBETH

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



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