



**Such Stuff podcast**  
**Season 5, Episode 2: The Shakespeare diaries, Macbeth**

[Music plays]

**Imogen Greenberg:** Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

This episode is the very first in a new feature on the podcast, the Shakespeare diaries. It follows our very own actor-artistic director Michelle Terry and actor Paul Ready as they discuss Shakespeare's plays from isolation. And in this brave new world we live in, they're not breaking social distancing rules, they just so happen to be married.

Up first, they sat down to chat about Macbeth. They starred as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in a production in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe last winter.

So, to make this episode, we gathered up a selection of questions to put to Michelle and Paul from around the organisation. But, for future episodes, we would love you, our wonderful audience, to contribute the questions for Michelle and Paul.

In our next Shakespeare Diaries episode, they'll be discussing Much Ado About Nothing, so do get in touch with us on social media and we'll put your questions to them.

So without further ado, here's Michelle and Paul reflecting on Macbeth, and we even got treated to a few speeches... They discussed superstition and conjuring, how they approach performing Shakespeare's characters and questions of ambition, guilt and culpability.

**Michelle Terry:** Welcome everybody to this episode of Such Stuff. My name's Michelle Terry.



**Paul Ready:** My name's Paul Ready.

**MT:** And we are going to talk to you about Macbeth, which we were both in in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse season in 2018/9, so this time last year we were just finishing and I played Lady Macbeth and Paul played Macbeth. Now I've said the name out loud quite a few times, I don't know if I've ever asked you whether you're superstitious about the word Macbeth. I hope you're not 'cause I'm gonna say it loads, Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth.

**PR:** Well I was superstitious before, before we started rehearsals. One of those superstitions being not saying Macbeth in a theatre. But then, because Rob Hastie, the director, asked us. Do you remember?

**MT:** Oh, yeah.

**PR:** Yeah. And it became apparent really quickly... I did say. So Rob said, 'How do you feel about saying Macbeth in the theatre, is anyone superstitious?' And I was like 'Yes I am superstitious'. But it became apparent pretty quickly that you couldn't get through a production of Macbeth without saying Macbeth.

**MT:** But also isn't the superstition that, because Macbeth is one of the most popular plays, if your theatre has to put on Macbeth, you're basically admitting the fact that no one is coming to your theatre, so you have to put on one of the most popular plays in the hope of boosting ticket sales. So by the time we've programmed it, it's probably too late, the curse has already happened.

**PR:** Do you know what, I worked with an actress and I'm pretty sure she told me she started that rumour.

**MT:** [Laughs]

**PR:** I don't know what the real superstition is around it. Is that what it is?



**MT:** I thought it was, but maybe it isn't. But, but I suppose, there was a definite sense that we were conjuring something, certainly even from the R&D [research and development] stage, that was the idea, was in this very small space, how can we properly use the play as a kind of conjuring and...

**PR:** Part of the play is about, you're playing with the fates, you're engaging with the fates, you're engaging with spirits and yeah, I think, yeah we didn't shy away from that. There was a great thing you said before we started rehearsing and... because the Wanamaker is only 5 years, 6 years old now, isn't it? So it's obviously a Jacobean style theatre, but it hasn't got much history, and one of the things that struck me when we started rehearsal is 'We've got to give this theatre its ghosts'. And theatres, empty theatres are pretty scary anyway, I find, pretty eery and incidental sounds, when you think a theatre is empty and you just hear a door close, or you think you hear a creak of a something in the rigging above. I thought it was perfect for that because that's what we made use of I think, in the soundscape.

**MT:** Mmm [agrees]. Because there's something about how much of this happens either in Macbeth's mind or in the audience mind. And that the other thing was knowing that you'd have never have read the play, really, well you'd never have read it probably before you'd seen it but you'd certainly never have read it before you were in it. And actually it takes quite a long time for the word witch or the word spirit to even appear. So 'when shall we three meet again' is a fairly innocuous start to a play, it could mean anything. So how does the play allow itself to conjure up something? We add on to it now, 400 years of knowing that these are called witches and hags. But the play actually just starts with three people on stage. And I suppose that was something that we were trying to look at with everybody playing the witches and everybody picking lots every night to see who would play the witches, we were kind of playing with that idea of fates, that anybody could start the play and anybody has the power to conjure and to change the course of fate or determine someone's fate or play with someone's imagination or ambition enough that they determine their own fate.



But the thing about the soundscape was... do you remember when we came in after the first night, and the apparition scene just wasn't working. And I think what's true of a lot of the plays in the Sam Wanamaker and the Globe, actually, is they're really... or maybe just Shakespeare in general, they're really hard to rehearse because they're built to be performed. So you don't really know what you've got until you put it in front of an audience. And it became really clear after first preview that the apparition scene just wasn't working. That we were able to play with people's imaginations, the text was working on people, the darkness was working on people. But there's something about the apparitions where you have to believe in the sounds that Macbeth is hearing and the sights that he is seeing and we just hadn't got it, had we? And I remember coming in the next day and... As Artistic Director, there's this kind of running joke that at some point a director's going to say to me that they either need more time or a smoke machine. And true enough, on day two of previews, we came in and Rob Hastie and the team had met and they said 'We think we might need a smoke machine'. And I just remember us all saying, 'Well just give us the afternoon and let's see what we can come up with. And that's when we just starting to find what sounds have we got either with our bodies or our voice or like thinking about radio and foley, and that's when we came up with the idea that the children's footsteps in the apparition scene would be... there's these things called snuffers that we use to put out all the candles backstage and some of them are long Elizabethan ones on the end of a metal stick and some of them are hand held that you put around your first finger. And if you kind of just go from the tip of the snuffer to the kind of longer end, or the rounder end that goes over the candle flame, you make the sound of footsteps on the floor? And just discovering that in the darkness, so I came on in pitch black and hid behind Paul while you were holding the candle weren't you?

**PR:** Yeah, so holding a single candle. So in the production we went down to very low light as well, which... you think it doesn't happen that often in there, does it?

**MT:** No.



**PR:** I mean certainly not things being lit by a single candle. Anyway, we went down to a single candle and another discovery about that is what a huge shadow that single candle threw on the back wall which allowed you to enter in darkness in that shadow. Brendan O'Hea, the director Brendan O'Hea, still doesn't believe you were on stage.

**MT:** [Laughs] I know [Laughs]. The other thing that we realised in the hearing it was in the speeches, just how often throughout the play the word witch is said. Not necessarily W-I-T-C-H, but W-H-I-C-H? And I think quite early on I think we made the choice to cut what some people think is all the additions that Middleton made, so people think that 'When shall we three meet again', that scene is definitely Shakespeare. But there's the Middleton stuff in the middle which is the 'Hubble bubble toil...', what is it?

**PR:** What, 'Hubble bubble toil and trouble'?

**MT:** Is that right? 'Hubble bubble toil and trouble', which is all kind of nice but doesn't really move the plot forward and when you remove all the stuff which is just kind of nice witchy stuff, and stick to the bare bones of the play, you realise just how much this forward motion from the beginning of the play to the end, and the speed with which everything happens, there is no time for any character to stop and think. And of course if there was time to stop and think, probably the king would never have died. But the architecture of the play so suits the architecture of that space and you realise that when you take out those witch scenes in the middle, it's like a Swiss clock, that Macbeth comes in one door, out the other, and there's just no time to stop and think. Are you gonna...?

**PR:** Yes. This is an example that we discovered, like a little while into the production, 'cause as you say, I think five weeks is not enough and you discover it on your feet as you're saying it, as the words take effect on you, as you're saying them. So this is an example of witches...

[Performance]



**PR:**

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?  
I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
As this which now I draw.  
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,  
And such an instrument I was to use.  
Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses,  
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,  
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. There's no such thing.  
It is the bloody business which informs  
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates  
Pale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,  
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,  
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear  
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,  
And take the present horror from the time,  
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives.  
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.  
I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.  
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell  
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

**PR:** The which, which, which all the time. And the other thing, as you're doing these plays and as the language works on you, noticing for example in that speech, because he does mention witchcraft, but he also mentions ghosts and so many sounds are



'which' / 'where' / 'whoo' / 'whoo' and you know, that's when I question what level Shakespeare was working on. I mean where, whether that was thought about and constructed specifically or whether it was just an instinct to use those, that kind of language because I would be amazed if anybody could work on that level, but then I'm constantly amazed by Shakespeare and what he writes.

**MT:** But also because we don't talk about poetry, this is, he's a poet isn't he? So poets there is a music to it, so whether it's conscious or not, there's a music to this play, or all the plays that begins and then just, we've said just takes on a rhythm of its own.

[Music plays]

**PR:** What was it like for each of you to get into the character of Macbeth / Lady Macbeth and how did you find coming out of those characters again? Did they stay with you at all?

**MT:** So what was it like playing those characters...

**PR:** Getting into characters.

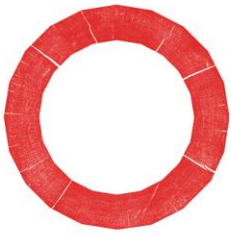
**MT:** Oh, getting into character, then playing those characters and then sustaining the characters and coming out of the characters.

**PR:** We'd made an agreement not to talk about it too much off stage, hadn't we?

**MT:** Yeah.

**PR:** Partly because, because of life outside, family life outside. And we didn't want to take the work home with us, did we? That's what I was thinking at least, I don't know what you were thinking.

**MT:** Well it's not so much that it was, 'cause you can't, the work's always there, because you are the work, aren't you? So you're always thinking about it, but... yes, how do you stay active with this stuff because, I heard an amazing phrase today, 'words don't make



rice'. And actually if what we're trying to do is make rice, us talking about it is great, but actually you only really discover stuff in the doing of it, so I think whilst stuff was percolating in our conscious or even unconscious, we were saving the doing of it for the rehearsal room as opposed to terrifying our child [laughs] with doing scenes from Macbeth in the living room.

But I think we were really aware of what we got for free by being a couple that had been together for a long time, I think we had a sense that this couple were a couple that knew each other, there was a symbiosis to them, that they understood each other's thought patterns, that within what you say there is a whole other world that opens up. So I think we knew that that was something we got for free just because of our relationship.

**PR:** Yeah, and I think one of the other things that comes from intimacy, which we were able to play on, and when you know somebody very well, is you can move from anger in one moment to laughing in the next moment and you can move between emotions very quickly if you know somebody very well.

**MT:** And I think that goes back to what you were saying about, you know, how can someone... what seems like really precocious writing is actually, this is a writer at the end of his career, that is now far more mature, far more nimble, and there's something... the dexterity of the psychology of these people? Like I think by the time you get to Macbeth there is such a rigorous psychology to these human beings, there's a dexterity to the text, there's a dexterity to the thoughts of these people, how quickly they think and how quickly a piece of information can land and it suddenly spurs a kind of snowballing of event after event after event, thought after thought after thought, and if only we didn't have to have the interval, because it's the snowball effect of this play that creates... is Macbeth born bad? Is Macbeth a bad person? Is Lady Macbeth bad? It's like... they're all kind of useful questions in retrospect or useful questions objectively, but when you're in it, it's not a question of whether you're a good person or a bad person, it's just opportunity keeps presenting itself. So just thinking about the letter





that Macbeth sends to Lady Macbeth, and within seconds she's read that, he mentions something about these witches potentially saying he could be king and then not only that, her brain goes to the potential of what that means, and then in comes a messenger saying Duncan's coming tonight. And so every which way you turn, just at the point where you go actually, if you could just sit down and have a cuppa, and be a bit rational about it, you might make a different choice, but he just keeps sending opportunity after opportunity after opportunity so judgement doesn't really... you don't really have time to judge yourself or these characters in a way.

**PR:** Well I think I find, and I don't know what you find, but often with Shakespeare plays, more than other plays I never feel like I would get into character. One of the reasons I'd say that is because more clearly for me than perhaps other playwrights, the character comes from the actions that you do, so from the words you say and the actions you play. And that's very clear in this play, isn't it? But also I think... I don't know who said it, maybe it was you who said it, a while ago. But the reason you can have 100 different Hamlets, the reason we can keep doing Hamlet is because every time there's a different human being playing Hamlet and so Hamlet means something else. So I play Macbeth and my Macbeth, the way I play or what occurs to me in rehearsing Macbeth and playing Macbeth is different to what would occur to Michelle, to anybody who, to anybody who played Macbeth. And so it feels quite personal to me. Like certainly with a play that moves like Macbeth moves, as you say, events, opportunities keep coming at them and they don't really have time to think. So for me, it's less about getting into character and more about starting the play, each night, and seeing what unravels. There is obviously we have a structure, which we've rehearsed but seeing how each night I'm affected differently, we affect each other differently... we were talking just before this and we were saying there aren't that many biographical details in Shakespeare and I don't know, is that true of most of them, or all of them?

**MT:** Yeah.



**PR:** But here's a couple in Macbeth, the fact that... have they or have they not talked about their ambition, his ambition to be king, before? Yes, they have. Has she or has she not had a baby? Lost a baby? Yes, or, I mean there's a... yes or no, but yes.

**MT:** Yes.

**PR:** So those are... if I was doing like a Chekhov, I think I would do any event mentioned, I would kind of fix it in a timeline so I'd create a biography that would get me to you know, the present day of the play, actually sometimes that's not useful, but you know that would be one way of starting to fill out the imagination of the character. But I feel like with these plays, for me, it just happens on the stage, on the night.

**MT:** Yeah, with the condition that you bring your whole sense of self to it.

**PR:** And that's a real problem, 'cause I haven't got one of those.

**MT:** [Laughs]. But to have asked yourself the question about what is ambition, what's your own ambition, it's less, we're not going to know what Macbeth's ambition is, we just know how events unfold but for you to understand what ambition is, or for me to understand what it is when Lady M says 'I've given suck', what does that, what experience have you had of that or not had of that. But I think it's true that he requires a vulnerability and an honesty of the self in a way that very few other writers demand of you? Which means that there is something of you that gets explored every time you do the play. So I think there's an accumulation that happens, the more you do these plays night after night after night. And of course, they weren't really built for that. Like Hamlet, you'd maybe play once and then it would go out of the rep and it would come back later on. They weren't really built for a human being to hold on to these characters and certainly in Macbeth, a lot of the characters go through profound trauma, so again what is that like having to play those, to relive that trauma or to imagine that trauma. You have to be mindful of that, so you have to be mindful of either, if you're



someone that needs to de-roll and we don't really talk about de-rolling, you know drama schools get you into character but don't really get you out of character. So either you de-roll or you're somebody, if you're really method, that you never leave the part behind you or whatever that means. But there is something in you that is unlocked and that is called upon when you tap into these people and I think sometimes he will build in a catharsis. I think there's something in the Lady M scene with the so-called madness scene, whatever going mad means, but I think what she plays out is her unconscious mind playing out the horror in front of her, she relives her in front of her. So actually going in to that scene is profoundly traumatic, because you are... again, this conjuring of these images and these nightmares that she's going through. But actually in the playing of it, in the action of it, there's a catharsis to that. So with a role like Lady M you actually get to leave that behind on stage really. But I don't know what it's like for Macbeth 'cause I suppose you don't get that kind of catharsis do you?

**PR:** Well I'd say there is a catharsis, a different kind of catharsis but maybe that comes to a later...

**MT:** Oh yeah.

**PR:** There's a question that goes do you think the play is ultimately optimistic or pessimistic about the human condition? I mean I actually feel at the end of Macbeth, maybe strangely for Macbeth there's an optimism, but I always thought playing it, having been haunted from the beginning by the witches, by the strange women, by these figures and had this idea that somehow, somewhere the fates were watching over, the fates had an answer to how his life was going to play out and then right at the end when he finds out that Macduff was pulled from his mother's womb... 'untimely ripped', yeah. At that moment, for me, I was like, 'ohh OK, so this is how fate says it's going to play out for me, this is what they meant'. And then a kind of final f-you to the world, when he goes 'OK, regardless of what they say, I will fight on anyway'. And that for me was always a moment of freedom. I'm not going to give it up, you're going to have to take my life from me. Like a moment of real decision



whereas for most of the play, things have been happening to him and happening to him. And that was the moment where I felt like he took his life in his hands. And lost it, but nevertheless.

**MT:** Yeah. Again, I suppose it goes back to not wanting to judge the play? So to judge them as pessimistic or optimistic, I think all the plays are... realistic? Whatever that means. That all of us have the capacity to be all of these people and I suppose that all of us have the capacity to be ruthlessly ambitious, all of us have the capacity to make mistakes, all of us have the capacity to want to fight for something we believe in. So I don't know if I judge it either or really, I just feel like all the characters are... there's an honesty to all of them that in all of us, there's a possibility for all of those things to play out I suppose.

[Music plays]

**MT:** Who do you think is more culpable? I mean there's absolutely no doubt that they do, that they both commit the most horrific crimes, so they're both guilty in that sense. [Laughs] Well, they're both guilty. But yeah I think I always found it a bit harsh that somehow Lady M was the one held responsible for it. Because, what does Macbeth say the minute he hears the witches? Yeah, 'if chance will have me king...'

**PR:** Er, 'if chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir'.

**MT:** The witches have said it to Macbeth and he's already contemplated it as a possibility, so that's it, that's out there, he puts it out there, he puts it in the audience mind, and then all he does is pass the baton on to Lady M that picks up on it and the only thing she does is know that he has too much of 'the milk of human kindness', and that he might need some galvanising. She knows his ambition, and everybody else knows his ambition, because he's already told the audience his ambition. So all she's doing is just stirring on what he's already admitted to anyway.



[Performance]

**MT:** The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
To cry "Hold, hold!"

**MT:** The bit that always broke my heart was... somehow they're so complicit, they're in it together, they're going after something they both want and there's a profound love between them. And then there's just that moment when he says to her... he sends everybody off and he sends her off as well, doesn't he? Lady M thinks that she's gonna stay and he says 'no, alone'. And Lady M goes. And that's the first fracture. That's the first time that they are not completely together. And then in the banquet he turns it around on her, as if to say that this was all her fault and it's so horrific for Lady M to watch someone that she loves more than anything, however frustrating it is, however dangerous it is that this is happening in front of people, to watch someone that you love in such a profound state and then for that person to recover from that state and say it's all your fault or you are to blame, that's the last time you see them together and it's also the last time you see Lady M sane. So whether she is culpable or she isn't, the accusation from Macbeth that she is, is enough to tip her over the edge I think.



[Performance]

**PR:** Why so, being gone,  
I am a man again. Pray you sit still.

**MT:** You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting,  
With most admired disorder.

**PR:** You make me strange  
Even to the disposition that I owe,  
When now I think you can behold such sights,  
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,  
When mine is blanched with fear.

**MT:** That was the moment, like 'you make me strange' that he turns on her for the first time in the play. And for me, that was it. That was the like, she tries again, she says 'you just need sleep, you just need sleep'. But something happens, something occurs in their moment when they both know they're not coming back from it.

[Performance]

**PR:** Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

[Music plays]

**IG:** That's it from Michelle and Paul for today, but they'll be back in two weeks with a new episode of The Shakespeare Diaries. Next time, they'll be talking about Much Ado About Nothing. So if you



have a question for Michelle and Paul about the play, about Shakespeare more broadly, or about their work as actors, do get in touch on social media.

And in these unprecedented times, our doors are temporarily closed, but we're finding and creating ways to stay connected and hopeful with you. As a charity that receives no government subsidy, we need donations to help us to continue to thrive in the future. Please donate what you can to help us continue making Shakespeare accessible to everyone.

You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg.

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