



Such Stuff podcast
Season 7, Episode 2: Fear, conjuring and catharsis in Macbeth

[Music plays]

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

In this episode we return to the subject of our new digital festival **Shakespeare and Fear**. Our programme of events is unpicking the relationship between our very real fears and anxieties and our obsession with ghost stories, hauntings and imaginary terrors.

In the autumn of 1605 in the first crisp winds of winter, the country was gripped by crisis. Already King James I had only been on the throne a few years and in that time a severe bout of the plague had ripped through the country closing the theatres. Then one November night a plot was uncovered to kill the King and blow up the Houses of Parliament on the 5 November. In the months following the gunpowder plot, the country's still shaken from the audacity and terror of this treasonous act, Shakespeare penned his spookiest story, **Macbeth**.

So in this episode we'll be taking a closer look at fear and conjuring in Macbeth. First up I spoke to our very own Dr Will Tosh about the conditions in which Shakespeare wrote **Macbeth**, the fears and anxieties that underpin the play and the uncanny resonances with today's fearful state of affairs.

So what was the context in which **Macbeth** was written?

Will Tosh: So like most of Shakespeare's plays we don't know precisely the moment at which he sits down to write the play, or he starts talking about it but we're pretty sure that **Macbeth** is in



performance by the spring of 1606, and in fact, it's performed at court in that year as well. And we also, you know we can tell from the material itself that Shakespeare's writing in the aftermath of the gunpowder plot, the attempt by a group of what we would now call terrorists to blow up the Houses of Parliament and the national elite in the November of 1605. So there's a sort of window between November 1605 and the spring of 1606 when Shakespeare is working on this play, and we could probably push it to I guess to the later end of that period just because one assumes there's some percolation that goes through Shakespeare's mind in terms of the shock of November 1605.

IG: And am I right in saying there's a plague period around that time as well?

WT: Yes and of course, even by 1605 or 1606, the country is still sort of recovering from quite a bad outbreak of plague in 1603, so there's definitely a kind of air of sort of danger and pestilence that swirling around every English person, and certainly Shakespeare as well in the autumn and winter of 1605/1606.

IG: And how do you sort of think this feeds into the play? How does **Macbeth** relate to these specific fears and anxieties of the period?

WT: You know **Macbeth** is one of those plays that's never gonna respond to a kind of, a short what's it about question, you know. I think there's a sense in the play that if Shakespeare's opening up the question of what, what might cause a person to contemplate doing unthinkable things. And so **Macbeth**, the Macbeths together I guess the prospect is can a king slaughter your way to the crown and then live with the consequences, those consequences are psychological, and they're real, and they're kind of life and death and the national. And I think for Shakespeare, and for lots of people around him those questions were at the front of their minds when it came to people who



might contemplate an atrocity like the gunpowder plot, I mean what is it that drives people to do that. And I think in **Macbeth**, I think the answer is a very complex mix of both very human and very supernatural things. One can imagine a play like **Macbeth** where the central kind of wicked act is motivated wholly by devilish agency, the devil comes along and says ooh do this bad thing, and the sort of weak human goes ok yes, and then suffers the consequences. **Macbeth** kind of toys with that idea doesn't it, like you've got the start of the play with the witches who have the power of prophecy, who know what's going to happen, and who seem to plant the seed in **Macbeth's** mind of doing this awful thing to kill Duncan to get the crown. But the play doesn't allow you to think that it's just them, you know the play is much more interested in Macbeth's own ambition, the ambition of the couple together, in other kind of roots and causes of those sorts of actions. So I think in terms of the play's messages and themes for our theme today of **Shakespeare and Fear**, it's really excavating what the kind of causes and sort of root origins of fear and dread might be, and the way in which they exist in this sort of odd equipoise between things from within, you know and fears that come from our own, not necessarily our own psyches but from the way our own brains and minds relate to outside prompts, and that's not to say outside prompts don't cause fears, or that indeed one's brain and one's soul doesn't cause fears but that they exist in this sort of, in this sort of slightly unsettling balance.

IG: And the witches in the play, how does that relate to what's happening in England at the time with fears around witches and witchcraft?

WT: So Shakespeare has always been a very good writer at writing for his audience and in 1605/1606 his prime kind of spectator is the king, his company had recently been named the King's Men their royal servants, and that's not to say everything he writes is sort of keyed into King James' tastes, there's



certainly in **Macbeth** one sees evidence of a writer keen to endear himself to a new monarch by writing about his interests and one of King James' interests was witchcraft and magic and devilry in its various forms. You know he was a very intellectual person who was an extremely well educated and thoughtful person, also someone of course soaked in the prejudices and superstitions of his time. So he wasn't credulous but he was deeply anxious about it, interested in it, believed in it quite deeply, he's had experiences in his younger years that lead him to believe that witchcraft was a real peril. And indeed when King James became King of England and relocated to London there was a sort of spate of publications on witchcraft including reprinting James' own work on the subject, as a way to sort of, sort meet the interest of the monarch. So I think there's a sense in which those witches exist as a, as an element of that explosion of sort of witch interest. It should be said of course that Shakespeare's source Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland, figures like the witches, figures as prophetic nymphs who sort of turn up and offer **Macbeth** a prophecy, so he doesn't invent them or kind of, or add them to the story of his own bat.

IG: And for a modern audience watching **Macbeth**, I mean one of the things that we're talking about in the **Shakespeare and Fear** festival is why we're so interested in these stories of fear and anxiety, and why we, I guess in this instance, why do we find the Macbeths such a compelling couple? Why do we continue to watch them and put the play on? And there's an element that we're talking about in the festival of catharsis, do you think that's one of the reasons why **Macbeth** endures, that as you say it's not just about these outside influences, it's this internal psychological battle, and why do we find the Macbeth's so compelling to watch?

WT: I think that thing Shakespeare does with the play which is tease out that middle point between demonic influence or witch



influence and the prompt of psychology is precisely what, what makes the play so compelling for a modern audience because we can choose, if you like to emphasise or deemphasise certain elements of that reading, and I think as modern audience members we choose to emphasise the psychology. To read the play as an incredibly compelling study of tyranny, of autocracy, of ambition, of ruthlessness, of murderous power, partly because we've had plenty of evidence over the past century, couple of centuries of those sorts of people and we except as sort of dramatic or literary embellishment the more sort of supernatural element. And it's interesting with **Macbeth** how it's very common for modern productions of the play to side-line some of the witch content, there's a scene in the middle of the play which is typically understood to be written by Thomas Middleton, although it's not 100% kind of proved, but it's taken absolutely as license to cut out because it's not by Shakespeare, it's not relevant to the play, and it's just too witchy, it is just way too supernatural.

IG: And that's the hubble bubble toil and trouble.

WT: Exact – yes, so that's the scene with Hecate and the witches kind of dancing around. You might argue, argue quite justifiably, that that's an important part of the balance that the element of supernatural persuasion in the play is really fundamental, but as modern audiences, we make our own, make our own selections, and I think that's no bad thing, I think it's allowed the play to ring really loudly as a sort of keynote or keystone for the way we understand bad leaders or bad kings and people whose psychologies and sort of desperate ambition overstay them in the most kind of catastrophic ways, which again we don't have to look very far for modern examples of political leaders who we might accuse of that sort of behaviour both in our country and in the United States of America, so I think **Macbeth** remains as that sort of symbol, a kind of



cautionary symbol of what happens to [laughs] well what might happen to leaders who kind of, who allow themselves to be over swayed in that way.

IG: And do you think there is an argument for calling **Macbeth** a ghost story or a haunting? Does it have those same textures and impulses that lead us to watch, sort of almost compulsively, or listen to ghost stories and horror stories?

WT: I think the idea of **Macbeth** as a ghost story is really fascinating, partly because you know, one way to understand ghosts is as revenants, you know as returnees from some sort of previous time, and that's absolutely what, what any important artistic work that also plums human feelings and psychology does and **Macbeth** certainly does it. And let's not forget that **Macbeth** literally has a ghost in it, the ghost of a central character turning up and being a ghost on stage, Banquo's ghost, and we've got a kind of bunch of witches, so there is, I think it's completely reasonable to incorporate **Macbeth** into a sort of long history of tales of the supernatural, of ghost stories, of stories that chill and frighten us, while acknowledging that as a work in the round, as a work kind of in and of itself, it is also kind of haunting us with cautionary tales of past rulers.

[Music plays]

IG: As part of our **Shakespeare and Fear** festival our 2018 production of **Macbeth** will return to the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse for a semi-staged reading. **Macbeth: A Conjuring** will be filmed by candlelight in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and available from 5 November to stream. So we delved into the archives and revisited this production of **Macbeth**, catching up with Director Rob Hastie and Actors Michelle Terry and Paul Ready talking about the conjuring, the superstition and the

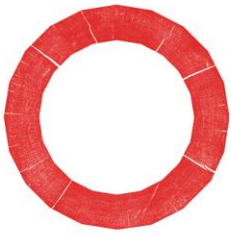


catharsis that goes into a production of **Macbeth**. Here's Michelle, Paul and Rob.

MT: 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. Because Rob Hastie, the director, asked us, 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**.

RH: We had a conversation on the first day about this superstition that persists about saying the name of this play, saying the name of this play not in context. There's very, there are sort of different variations on it and different authorities will claim where it comes from. I have no problem in saying **Macbeth**, but the temptation to knock on something as soon as I've said it has grown. There were some, there were some actors in the company who didn't think that they would be anxious about saying that. It's that feeling that I don't believe it, but better safe than sorry. You know a mind-set takes over whereby you go, well it doesn't cost me to just be safe and do the little ritual



that will protect me from the whatever. It does seep into your, you just your everyday behaviour. You start to think well maybe it doesn't cost me anything to do that little ritual or not to step on that crack so I might as well which is the slippery slope to superstition and eventually to kind of mass delusions that lead to a kind of witch hunt. And maybe one of the reasons why a superstition like the saying of the name of this play takes hold is because actors have to, have to invest very deeply emotionally, spiritually, physically in something and in each other in a very short space of time, so actually picking up each other's, each other's ticks, each other's nuances, each other's beliefs even, is inevitable when you're in a context where you're asking people to be that open and make themselves that vulnerable. So you can see, you can absolutely see where it comes from and some of that stuff is useful, as well. It's useful to kind of charge the atmosphere. What we got really interested in is the mechanics of a spell being that a group of people turn up at a particular time and place and say a collection of words in a particular order, and if you say the words in that order with the right intention then something happens. And that seems to me to be that's actually quite a good description of what a play is, that a group of people turn up at the same time, a specified time and place and say some words in the right order and hopefully if we're doing our job something happens. So we got, we all got talking about what scares us and what lines we wouldn't cross. I'm a fully paid-up rational, secularist, 99% card stamped for atheism so, and yet



there are still things I wouldn't, you know I don't really mess with Tarot, I wouldn't do a ouija board, I'm, you know, a bit scared of walking in a graveyard after dark, and not just because of earthly fears but, but I'm a bit superstitious it turns out, I thought I wasn't, but there are things that actually when challenged, like I probably wouldn't mess with that. So we were all talking about the thing you sort of don't want to do in case you'd invite something in, and the play is very much about two people who kind of look over, look over into the abyss and step forward anyway, they sort of know that it's going to bring them nothing but misery but they do it anyway. So we started thinking about, what if you know, voicing these witches, playing these witches was something that you didn't really want to do. You didn't really want to be the person embodying the spirits that night, being the kind of instruments of darkness, which is what Banquo calls them, and so we thought well what if there is some sort of ritual or game whereby who has to embody the instruments of darkness is randomly selected and could we do that for each performance, could we do that on each occasion when we all turn up in the specified time and place and, and say this particular form of words in the hope that something happens.

Macbeth company: The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about,
Thrice to thine and thrice to mine



And thrice again, to make up nine.
Peace! The charm's wound up.

MT: 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 stuck with me when we started rehearsal is, we've got to give this theatre it's 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. 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 before, 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, 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, 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 on the first, 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 with, 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 handheld 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.

Macbeth Company: [Muffled sounds, screeches, a baby crying]
Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth.

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 whilst stuff was percolating in our unconscious or even conscious I think, 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 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 into that scene is profoundly traumatic, because you are, again, these conjurings 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 there's a, 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 really do you?

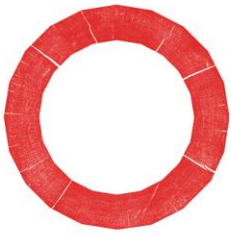
PR: Well I'd say there is a catharsis, a different kind of catharsis but maybe that comes to a later.

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 feel, 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, oh 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.

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 us but don't miss **Macbeth: A Conjuring** from Saturday 5 November. You can buy tickets to all the events in the **Shakespeare and Fear** festival on our website

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