

Episode Two: Take a Bow

"Superstitious"

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On April 9, 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox courthouse in Virginia, and although this didn't end the fighting immediately, this moment nonetheless marked a beginning to an end of the Civil War.

Shortly thereafter, a weathered man, upon visiting the Union Army in Virginia, sat on the steamboat *River Queen* with two senators and a french nobleman reflecting on the past four years. He was tired and had aged quickly in that short time. And now he needed to breathe and find connection between his life and those who came before him. With a heavy heart, he read one of his favorite passages to his fellow colleagues:

"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing, can
touch him further."

He had always loved Shakespeare, but one play stood out among them all as his favorite, and is known to have said, "I think nothing equals Macbeth" (Beran, 2010).

A few days later, during a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., the Shakespeare loving Abraham Lincoln was shot. The president was pronounced dead at 7:22 in the morning on April 15, 1865, only days after reading passages from "Macbeth".

According to legend, "Macbeth" has been cursed since its debut in the early 1600s. But the 16th president thought nothing of such a curse, and his story now belongs in the realms of the superstitious . . .

Intro

Thespi

Those who live, breathe, eat, and sleep theatre have a special name. They're called thespians, and they're generally associated with actors. But what is a thespian? The etymology of 'thespian' isn't recorded until the 1670s, but we know the word is attributed to Ancient Greece, and an actor

by the name of Thespis who is said to be the first tragedy actor in Greece. He is also attributed as the inventor of tragedy. According to Aristotle, Thespis was different. Up until the 6th century BC, plays consisted of a chorus who detailed the drama at hand. Thespis was the first actor to introduce the prologue and engage in dialogue with the chorus. Some believe Thespis's adventuring onto the stage greeting his audience with singular speech occurred on November 23rd. Granted, there's no way to prove that the evolution of the theatre occurred in this manner, nor is there a way to prove that Thespis delivered his first speech on November 23rd 534 BC. Nevertheless, it's believed that on this day every year, the ghost of Thespis returns to the theatre. . . and some theatre companies believe that performing on this night will summon his spirit.

Ghost-lights

Stephen interview

If you're a believer in the ghost of Thespis, or any theatre ghosts, you may opt to leave a light on in the theatre at night. Usually, a single light is kept on downstage after everyone has left the theatre. For practical reasons this is simply so the first person in the theatre the next evening can see enough of the stage so that he does not trip and fall into the orchestra pit. But that's the practical reason. Don't be fooled: there are a couple other reasons for the existence of the ghost light.

The ghost light stems from an earlier time when theatres were gas-lit. The dimly lit light would have been used to "relieve pressure on gas valves" (Wright, 2015). But another popular legend exists. It's said that a burglar had the bright idea to rob a Broadway theatre. No lights on in the theatre, the burglar fell off the stage in the pitch black and broke his leg. The would-be robber felt the theatre was at fault and sued.

Regardless of the reasoning behind the ghost light, one thing is clear: the single dim lit light left on in the theatre at night fuels superstition.

What Not to Wear on the Stage

Contemporary actors may not see wearing blue as a bad omen, but there was a time in which the color was considered bad luck. Only a few degrees of shade separate blue from purple; purple being the color of royalty; an expensive color. In the theatre's earlier days, blue would have also been an expensive

dye to utilize for costuming. However, theatres that might have been suffering to survive would have invested the last of their funds to dye their costumes blue, and this would symbolize the producers' affluence. But in order for the theatre to stay afloat, a company would often add silver to the costumes as a means of "proving their wealth". The addition of silver would combat the superstition that the theatre was failing.

If you're familiar with the Greek god Zeus, you may be well aware of Zeus's philandering. In one story, Zeus falls for Io, a priestess to his wife, Hera. In her anger, Hera gave Io to an a monster named Argos, whose body was covered in all-seeing eyes. Zeus, feeling sorry for Io, tries to help her by sending Hermes to kill Argos. However, Hera had discovered such a plan and took Argos's eyes before his death, transferring them to the tail of a peacock so she might continue spying on her unfaithful husband.

The eye of the peacock's tail represents an alert and ever watchful supreme being. But over time, the peacock feather also became associated with the "evil eye" and death. Actors took it upon themselves to ban the peacock feather as a costume piece, fearing that some evil deity would manifest on stage, causing theatres to catch fire, sets to crash, and deaths to occur.

Break a Leg

One thing you should never do is tell an actor "good luck" before a performance; for many, doing so can have dire consequences.

Stephen Interview -- Break a leg

No one really knows the origins of the tradition, but there are several possibilities. Some suggest that the origins of "break a leg" date back to Ancient Greece. Rather than applauding after or during a performance, it's said that the Greeks would stomp their feet. Another possible origin regards the actual curtain used in proscenium staging. Breaking the leg of a curtain means to enter the space in which actors would play, or get paid.

Abraham Lincoln was shot and killed by former actor, John Wilkes Booth during a show at Ford's Theatre. One origin story suggests that after Booth jumped from the presidential box and onto the stage, Booth broke his leg. Although this is an entertaining notion for the "break a leg" superstition, this particular story cannot be true (Webster, 2008).

Understudies during the Vaudeville era would not have been paid had their counterparts actually been able to play their roles. It's said that understudies would, in jest, tell actors to "break a leg" so that the standbys could perform (Wright, 2015).

Another possibility stems from the French actress, Sarah Bernhardt. After having her leg amputated in 1915, the actress's career managed to thrive (Webster, 2008).

Regardless of the actual origin of this saying, "break a leg" is, in fact, a way of wishing an actor "good luck" without having to put a curse upon her.

No Whistling!

For those who enjoy the theme song from the "The Andy Griffith Show" or the infamous "Twisted Nerve" from "Kill Bill", you may want to consider leaving the whistling outside the theatre. Yes, whistling in the theatre is also considered bad luck. This superstition stems from off duty sailors looking to make some extra cash. Backstage work is an arduous and hefty chore, so sailors, who had experience with rigging on ships, were often hired to manipulate the sets and work with heavy curtains. As the stagehands were oftentimes sailors, they would create a set of coded whistles to signal to each other when a set needed lowered or a curtain needed raising. An actor whistling on stage could inadvertently signal the dropping of a set, which may come crashing upon a fellow cast member.

Under the Pillow: Sleeping with Your Script

Don't worry about finding the magic pill to help you learn your lines. The theatre offers a remedy to help make that soliloquy easier to learn. An actor can place her script under her pillow at night and learn through diffusion. No, there's no scientific proof for this, but some actors insist on the practice.

Transition

The Scottish Play

"Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble, eye of needle, tongue of shoe, hand of clock that points at two! This is the real thing, you know, right out of Shakespeare," (Witch Hazel, 1954).

Of course, this isn't the real thing "right out of Shakespeare". However, Disney's Halloween inspired "Trick or Treat" Donald Duck episode does feature a witch and several spells that serve

as a reminder to one of the most superstitious plays known to the theatre.

You won't hear actors mention the title of this play. However, you may hear them refer to it as "The Scottish Play". Uttering the true identity of this play is sure to bring severe bad luck to those involved.

In folklore, it's believed that the Scottish play was cursed from the very beginning. It's said that Shakespeare borrowed real spells from real witches in the construction of this play. The witches, upset with Shakespeare's decision, cursed "Macbeth", and the superstitions regarding this play started around 1606. Hal Berridge, the first ever Lady Macbeth is said to have died on the play's opening night; William Shakespeare had to take over the role.

By 1672 in a performance of the Scottish play in Amsterdam, the actor playing Macbeth killed the actor playing Duncan when he used a real knife. Almost a hundred years later, a nobleman, wishing to speak to his friends on the other side of the theatre got up and walked across the stage. The actors, infuriated with the disruption of the show used prop swords to drive the nobleman out of the theatre who returned with the militia and burned the theatre down (Webster, 2008).

In 1849 fans of the British actor William Charles McCready and fans of the American actor Edwin Forrest brawled outside of New York's Astor Place Opera House during a production of the Scottish play. 22 people died in the riot and 100 were left injured.

Originally built in 1885 as a circus, the Coliseum Theatre in Oldham, England still stands as a testament to the Scottish play superstition. In 1947, actor Harold Norman was playing Macbeth, and during a staged sword fight found that he had been stabbed. Norman managed to crawl off the stage for assistance and did receive first aid. However, a few weeks later, Harold Norman succumbed to his wounds.

In Bermuda, 1953, Charlton Heston had his bout with the curse. On opening night of the Scottish play, he received burns to the groin and legs. Heston was not the only person to be affected by the curse during this particular showing. It's also said that Macbeth's castle, after being set on fire caused the audience to fear for their lives. Believing the fire on set would spread, audience members fled the production.

But it's the 1988 Broadway production that gets a standing ovation for Scottish play disasters. The 1988 production

starred Christopher Plummer and Glenda Jackson as a steady pair. The rest of the crew would not or could not get through the production. This Scottish play would see three different directors, "six stage managers, five MacDuffs, two set designers, two lighting designers, and six cast changes" (Webster, 2008). And that's not all. There were also 26 different cases of the flu, an amalgam of groin and torn ligaments, and other illnesses.

There is a way to safeguard oneself if she happens to utter the "M" word in the theatre. She must first leave the room, turn around three times in any direction, spit on the floor, and then knock on the door of the room from whence she came, and ask permission to return.

From its first showing in 1606, to Abraham Lincoln's recital of "Macbeth", to Broadway disasters, the Macbeth curse is a superstition that receives the utmost respect from theatre professionals, and is never taken lightly. With so many catastrophes involving this play, perhaps its safest if we call it "the Scottish play".

Idioms for Idiots

Each episode of Superstitious features a famous saying in connection with the discussed topic. On this week's segment of "Idioms for Idiots" we will dive into the phrase "the show must go on".

The phrase "the show must go on" reaches back to the 19th century when circuses were popular. Circuses often featured wild and exotic creatures trained to put on a show. Of course, having a perfect show was not always in the cards, and at times, an animal would escape or a performer might be injured. In order to keep the audience from panicking, the ringmaster and the band would continue the show; the audience unaware that anything was wrong.

The popular idiom is still used in theatres today, but has also been popularized in songs such as Queen's "The Show Must Go On". The song's message: no matter what you're going through in life, you must push through and go on.

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"Superstitious" is a bi-weekly podcast seeking to explore superstitions, their origins and places in history, and to seek out what contemporary superstitions are still knocking at our doors.

This episode of "Superstitious" is dedicated to Zeitgeist Theatre Company. Remember, "It's never too late to do South Pacific!"

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Join me for the next episode of Superstitions on Monday, October 2nd!

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