

***Macbeth* opera proposal**

“I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry”

Stuart MacRae – Composer Louise Welsh – Librettist Polly Graham – Director

Stuart MacRae and Louise Welsh are excited to be working on a new opera, *Macbeth*, after initial concept development supported by Creative Scotland.

William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is a keystone of modern culture which continues to inspire and excite contemporary audiences. The tragedy allows multiple interpretations of character and motivation and has been subject to many adaptations across nations and genres, including, notably, Verdi’s adaptation for the opera stage some hundred and seventy-seven years ago. During initial creative development for the *Macbeth* opera, MacRae and Welsh explored the subject in workshops with dramaturgs and opera singers, and are now working with director Polly Graham on plans for the realisation of the work.

MacRae and Welsh’s dual fascination with *Macbeth* is rooted in questions about the Macbeths’ shared ambition, the deal-with-the-devil inevitability of their fall once they commit to King Duncan’s murder and the shattering totality of their final defeats. The arc of ambition, transgression, soaring promotion and sickening descent towards final disaster and death presents a perfect structure for opera. As Scottish artists they have a particular passion for ‘the Scottish play’ and bring unique insights to its atmosphere, character and context.

The characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and questions about the world they inhabit, invite complex responses. During development of the opera MacRae and Welsh have made several key decisions:

Setting

The opera is set during an indeterminate historical period and place – depending on directorial decisions this may be the past, present or future – but it is assumed to be a period of persecution against women *labelled as* witches. Productions of the opera are not expected to be set in an identifiable Scotland, although the atmosphere of Scotland’s landscapes and castle architecture, with all their contrasting pools of light and dark, will be embedded in the sound-world.

‘Witches’

In the opera the ‘witches’ may appear in various guises; initially, as spoils of war, wise women able to manipulate Macbeth with prophecies of advancement. This first manifestation *appears* magical to Macbeth and Banquo, but their traditional portrayal as crones with magical powers is rejected in favour of a subtler and more modern view. They step beyond the ordinary action into an extraordinary musical atmosphere at moments of revelation. As the tragedy progresses, the ‘witches’ remain present to a greater extent than in the play, appearing to Macbeth in other guises such as servants or soldiers, inviting the audience to question Macbeth’s grasp on reality. This also gives them a narrative arc and an agency not present in the original. They also imply a parallel to Lady Macbeth: a woman who chooses to transgress against a patriarchal society; this parallel will be reflected in the music.

The main character

- In our concept of the work, Macbeth is a travesty role for a mezzo-soprano. Casting a woman as Macbeth invites the audience to assess (but not dismiss) Macbeth's performance of masculinity - a recurring theme in Shakespeare's play - and has potential to underline his vulnerability. The audience will deplore Macbeth's actions, but they will also regret his descent and humiliating death. This casting also adds sound-world advantages by significantly changing the balance of sound colours towards an equal prevalence of female and male voices (see 'sound-world' below). There is no implication that Macbeth *is* a woman: we are adopting an operatic convention almost never used today, but also drawing on the example of theatrical productions of other Shakespeare plays in which male leads are played by women.

Sound-world

- The sound-world will make reference to early Baroque, modern and electroacoustic elements within the context of orchestral instrumentation. This will be achieved through an economical, lean use of instruments to create an intense and intimate atmosphere in places, the use of sampler, and a varied palette of vocal techniques including recitative and ornamentation. Macbeth's vocal lines will have a tendency to downwards, 'falling' gestures, indicating the inescapability of his descent, while Lady Macbeth's will tend to go upwards in her crucial early scenes. This creates the possibility for the two characters' lines to cross over each other and to switch places as the balance of power shifts between them - something not easily achievable with a male-voice Macbeth. At the same time, Macbeth's accompaniments will tend to go in the opposite direction, as reality confronts aspiration: an inversion of Dido's Lament with its falling bass and rising vocal line. There is flexibility within the current conception of the work regarding the use of a chorus, to be discussed with the commissioner.

Libretto

- The libretto will largely be drawn from Shakespeare's original text, pared down and restructured – though there may be additions such as a drinking song (opening of the banqueting scene, immediately before Macbeth's encounter with Banquo's ghost) and some more naturalistic text for the 'witches'. Mindful of the requirements of the singing voice, it will focus on key images from Shakespeare's text, condensing much of the second half of the play into a much more concise form in order to propel the drama.
- Some of Shakespeare's minor characters are cut or amalgamated to avoid an unwieldy number of singers. Several singers will play more than one role. Attention is paid to the choice of doubling, and to the potential connections between characters.
- *Macbeth* is an iconic text. The basic plot and key moments, such as the dagger scene, and the arrival of Birnam Wood are familiar even to those who have never read or seen the play in full. The audience's acquaintance with the text offers an opportunity to engage with their anticipation, to create moments of tension and catharsis, while ensuring that the plot is compellingly told for those unfamiliar with the source.

During the development of the *Macbeth* opera MacRae and Welsh have collaborated on [Creating the Monster](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7c4zsomd0WhUqqRwAKLJ7H?si=4DfTbnr3TW2A-eV9TB0Ccow), a series of three podcasts about their creative process (available on Spotify). <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7c4zsomd0WhUqqRwAKLJ7H?si=4DfTbnr3TW2A-eV9TB0Ccow>

CAST (including suggested role doublings and voice types)

MACBETH	-	Mezzo-soprano
LADY MACBETH	-	Soprano
MALCOLM	-	Countertenor
MACDUFF	-	Baritone (or Tenor)
ROSS	-	Tenor
BANQUO	-	Baritone (or Tenor)
WITCH 1 / SERVANT	-	Soprano
WITCH 2 / SERVANT	-	Soprano
WITCH 3 / 3RD MURDERER	-	Mezzo-soprano
LENNOX / 2ND MURDERER	-	Baritone
DUNCAN / DOCTOR	-	Bass / Bass-baritone
LADY MACDUFF / GENTLEWOMAN (ALSO DONALBAIN IF INCLUDED)	-	Mezzo-soprano
CAPTAIN / 1ST MURDERER (ALSO MESSENGER)	-	Tenor (or Baritone)
FLEANCE / MACDUFF'S SON	-	Treble (or Silent)

(Servants, Soldiers, Lords/Ladies, Attendants) – CHORUS (subject to discussion with commissioner/availability)

INSTRUMENTATION (subject to discussion)

Orchestra

Size of forces will depend on resources, but we envisage the opera being possible with a minimum of 15-20 players, up to full strength orchestra if available, including some instruments that would add Baroque colours e.g. theorbo/guitar or Baroque oboe/string instrument. The ensemble should include Piano/keyboard/sampler*

*Sampler will be used to facilitate playback of several elements of pre-recorded soundscape and electroacoustic audio, including whispered voices (witches/Banquo's ghost etc), birdsong soundscapes (crows) and processed instrumental sounds (particularly flute/percussion) - other methods of playback such as Q-Lab may also be considered if more appropriate.

About the artists

Stuart MacRae and Louise Welsh have collaborated on four critically acclaimed operas of increasing complexity over a ten-year period. The *Macbeth* opera builds on themes they have been exploring for over a decade. The complicity and collaboration of killers who were married to each other was the inspiration for their first short opera *Remembrance Day* (2009). Violent conflict was at the heart of the award-winning *Ghost Patrol* (2012). Tensions between supernatural and temporal worlds underpins the internationally acclaimed *The Devil Inside* (2016). Unruly landscapes inform their most recent opera *Anthropocene* (2020).

Director Polly Graham was awarded the 2016 Independent Opera Director Fellowship and was nominated as Best Newcomer at the International Opera Awards in 2017. *Le Vin Herbé* was nominated for a UK Theatre Award in 2017. Polly's work has included world premiere productions of operas by Olga Neuwirth and Freya Waley Cohen, as well as a recent production of *The Fairy Queen* incorporating text from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.