

BY MARK MURPHY

**'D** OUBLE, double toil and trouble." It's not only one of the most famous lines from William Shakespeare's works, but it speaks volumes about the play it comes from, *Macbeth* — or, as actors and directors call it, "the Scottish play." Well-known actors such as John Gielgud, Peter O'Toole, Christopher Plummer and Glenda Jackson all have battle scars from playing the ultimate party couple, the Macbeths.

Many have attempted to stage the play, but relatively few have succeeded in making the story work with clarity. Some say the play is cursed, while others fault Shakespeare's narrative structure. Why then do so many theatre companies and actors attempt it?

I asked myself that question as I watched rehearsals for a production of *Macbeth*, which is on stage at Trenton State College in Ewing through April 21. What I saw was a combination of undergraduate and professional actors take the legend head-on. As it turned out, very few of the actors seemed fearful of the alleged curse, and while the show's director, Hal Hogstrom, has a healthy respect for the play's dark history, he, too, seemed untroubled by the unhappy stories tied to past productions.

Why so many horror stories, and tales of doomed productions? Some say it's because of the witches who open the play, the ones who foresee that Macbeth and his wife will kill their king, so as to rule over Scotland. And Dale Simon, who plays the part of Banquo, Macbeth's friend, offered this: "This is truly an evil play. It begins with a curse and an execution, then (follows with) murder after murder after murder."

No other play in history has been so closely linked to bad luck; productions of *Macbeth* have resulted in coronaries, car accidents, mysterious ailments, botched lines and sword wounds. And the superstition among theater folks is not taken lightly. Mentioning the play's name in a theatre when it's not in rehearsal is considered terrible luck. A variety of euphemisms are used as substitutes for the "M" word. The most common, for hundreds of years, has been, "the Scottish play."

Maria Vaughan, the costume-shop

manager at Trenton State, is unashamedly superstitious when it comes to *Macbeth*. If an actor makes the mistake of mentioning the play's title in her presence — and they have — she resorts to an age-old remedy.

"I make them turn around three times and knock and swear before they can re-enter the room," she said.

Perhaps she's on to something. You can never be too careful, and past performances have yielded the following misfortunes:

- During the very first performance of the play, on August 7, 1606, Hal Berridge, the boy who played Lady Macbeth (boys played the ladies' parts in Shakespeare's day), died backstage.

- In 1849, after years of intense competition, the rivalry between American actor Edwin Forrest and visiting British actor Charles Macready culminated in a riot, in which 31 people were killed, more than 100 others injured. It took place in front of the Astor Place Opera House in New York City, where Mr. Macready was performing his *Macbeth* while Mr. Forrest was doing the same on Broadway.

- Percy Hammond, a drama critic for *The New York Herald Tribune* died only a few days after panning Orson Welles and John Houseman's production of *Macbeth* in Harlem in 1936. The production, labeled "Voodoo Macbeth" by some, featured actual witch doctors.

Despite its horrific history, *Macbeth* is produced frequently. So what exactly is its allure? I raised the subject with Trenton State's *Macbeth*, George Hartpence.

"Well, *Macbeth* really is a tragic hero, a murderer with a conscience," he said. "He is a powerful man caught in a morality play. He makes one false step, and then everything streamrolls from there. It is his choice to murder the King, Duncan, a man who is his benefactor. He sins and pays for his sins.

"We see him disintegrate before his eyes. This is very exciting and seductive for an audience. Perhaps they can identify with the darkness that *Macbeth* embraces."

Some feel, however, that the play is flawed. Laurence Olivier, for one, felt that it

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Above, a model of the set and the work itself in progress.

## Something Wicked This Way Comes... Or Does It?

When staging *Macbeth* — sorry, 'the Scottish play' — one should consider the sordid history of the drama, which many believe to be cursed. A cast at Trenton State College is doing just that, while bravely facing the play's many other challenges.



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George Hartpence, who plays *Macbeth*, scores a hit against Toddy Cyr (*Donalbain*) during rehearsals for the Trenton State production.