

EXPLORING

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

APRIL 1-MAY 8, 1999

IRT UPPERSTAGE

AN IRT STUDY GUIDE

Act I

Macbeth and Banquo, conquering generals in the service of Duncan, King of Scotland, have succeeded in putting down a rebellion led by the Thane (or duke) of Cawdor. The fame of their deeds reaches the King before they do. While crossing a heath on their return home from battle, they meet three witches, who hail Macbeth first with his own title (Thane of Glamis), then as Thane of Cawdor and "king hereafter." Banquo also demands a prophecy, and he is told that he shall be the father of kings though he himself will never rule. Still puzzling over these prophetic words, the two are greeted by other lords dispatched by King Duncan, who confirm that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor. Thus, part of the witches' prophecy has already come true. Macbeth's hopes are stirred that the rest of their prophecy may also hold true and that he might become king. When Macbeth and Banquo join up with the rest of the army, Macbeth is congratulated on his promotion; then King Duncan names his son Malcolm heir to the throne and tells Macbeth that they plan to visit Macbeth's castle as a mark of royal favor. Macbeth starts home to receive the King, sending news of the visit and the strange prophecies ahead in a letter to his wife. She seizes upon her husband's dreams of power even more resolutely than he, and when he arrives home she is determined that Macbeth shall take the opportunity of Duncan's visit to usurp the throne.

Act II

Banquo, stirred by the prophecy on the heath that his descendants will be kings, fights down his impulse to hasten the event. With the encouragement of his ambitious wife, Macbeth formulates a brutal plot to kill King Duncan, making it appear that his servants are responsible. Macbeth's conscience surfaces even before the deed is done, but the unflinching Lady Macbeth calms his nerves and drives him forward. Lady Macbeth drugs Duncan's

bedchamber servants, and Macbeth stabs the King while he sleeps. But Macbeth flees the scene of the crime before the setup is complete, and Lady Macbeth must return to Duncan's bedchamber to place the daggers and smear the servants with blood to seal their apparent guilt. In the morning when the murder is discovered, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, pretending grief, join the mourners. To divert suspicion, Macbeth kills the grooms as though angered by their denial of the deed. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing a similar fate, flee to England, thus casting guilt for the King's death on them. Macbeth is crowned king, but the honor seems incomplete when he remembers the prophecy that Banquo's sons, not his, will reign in Scotland.

Act III

Knowing that Banquo suspects him of Duncan's murder, Macbeth plots the assassination of Banquo and his son, Fleance. He invites them to his coronation banquet, intending to have them killed on the road as they travel to Dunsinane. Fleance escapes, but Macbeth's hired killers succeed in killing Banquo. At the banquet as Macbeth praises the absent Banquo, the murdered ghost of Banquo appears to Macbeth, seizing him with terror. Unseen by the other lords and Lady Macbeth, the apparition takes a seat at the banquet table, causing Macbeth to behave wildly. In this state, Macbeth utters words which lead his nobles to suspect his guilt; to cover for her husband's loose tongue, Lady Macbeth dismisses the guests, claiming that her husband is ill. The nobles learn that Malcolm has been joined in England by Macduff, one of the most powerful of the Scot's lords, whose defection to Malcolm's side speaks of a coming rebellion against Macbeth's claim to the throne.

Act IV

Macbeth visits the witches again and begs them to prophesy his fate. They answer his demands by showing

him a series of apparitions. The first is of an armed head, warning him to beware Macduff; the second is of a bloody child, which promises that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth"; the third is of a child drowned, with a tree in his hand, which promises Macbeth safety until Birnam Wood shall come to Dunsinane. These prophecies bolster Macbeth's courage, for they seem to suggest that it would be impossible to conquer him; and yet the witches conclude their prophecy by tormenting Macbeth with a vision of Banquo's line of kings. In hopes of securing his safety, Macbeth issues orders to have Macduff's wife and children murdered. When news of this horrible deed reaches Macduff in England, Malcolm and the English forces join with Macduff to rid Scotland of the tyrannical Macbeth. With ten thousand soldiers they set out for Scotland.

Act V

In Dunsinane Castle, Lady Macbeth, wracked with guilt, walks and talks in her sleep, reliving hideous memories of her crimes. Macbeth prepares to repel the English invaders, whose approach has been reported. To conceal their numbers and their movements, Malcolm orders each soldier to cut and carry a bough from Birnam Wood. The wood then literally moves towards Dunsinane, thus fulfilling one of the witch's prophecies. Macbeth learns this at the same time that he is told that Lady Macbeth has committed suicide. Robbed of his strongest ally and deserted by his followers, Macbeth rushes into battle. He kills young Siward, son of the English general, and then comes face to face with Macduff. Still confident that he cannot be defeated by one "of woman born," Macbeth challenges Macduff, only to learn that Macduff was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped," meaning that he was born by Caesarian section, not by natural childbirth. Thus the last of the prophecies comes true, as Macduff kills Macbeth in single combat, and Malcolm is crowned king of Scotland. ★

ABOUT *Macbeth*

In 1603, Queen Elizabeth of England died leaving no heir. Her nearest surviving relative was a distant cousin, James VI, King of Scotland, whose mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been beheaded by Elizabeth for her rival claim to the English throne. James suffered the turmoil attendant on this heritage and believed that much of his family's suffering and his own fears were due to a conspiracy of witches. In 1595, James published a book on the occult called *Daemonologie*; during his reign over fifty women accused of witchcraft were burned at the stake.

Scholars agree that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* especially for King James: the king being the patron of Shakespeare's theatrical company, it is easy to imagine the playwright hatching the idea to create a play combining ancient Scottish history with the occult, both subjects of considerable interest to the new king. *Macbeth* was probably first performed by command at court in 1606, to celebrate a visit from James's brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark.

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays. Two reasons may account for this: James I was known to nap during long performances, and Shakespeare was bargaining that a brief, action-packed play would retain the royal attention. His guest, the King of Denmark, presumably spoke no English and could not, therefore, be expected to follow intricacies of plot and language. The compression of the language in *Macbeth* also seems to indicate that the play was written, or at least finished, in great haste; this is also indicated by the lack of subplots and the fact that the minor characters are less developed than in other Shakespeare plays.

There can be no doubt that the play was intended to please its royal audience: James was a direct descendant of the honorable General Banquo in the play. But there is some historical indication that Shakespeare's plan back-

fired: King James was apparently less than pleased to see a play based on the assassination of Scottish kings, and the realistic portrayal of the witches is likely to have terrified a man as obsessed with witchcraft as James was. Evidence suggests that the king banned performances of the play for five years. It was produced only once again in Shakespeare's lifetime, in 1611 at the Globe Theatre, which burned to the ground shortly thereafter, launching, perhaps, the superstitious belief that a curse surrounds the play and its productions.

In speculating about the creation of *Macbeth*, the critics tell a persuasive tale of Shakespeare skimming the history of Scotland, discovering there "a strange, bleak, haunted world ... where savage beings fulfill the passionate cycle of their dreadful lives as if under enchanted compulsion." As a source, Shakespeare drew his ideas from Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577), which presented a relatively factual picture of eleventh-century Scotland: a barbaric time when the nation was just emerging from a group of warring tribes. But Shakespeare

altered and compressed the facts to shape his own story of Macbeth: an honorable general who is driven by his own ambition and his wife's exhortations to act upon the prophecies of witches and usurp the throne of Scotland.

This issue of usurpation—seizing a position of power by force—has changed through history from an accepted method of determining leadership to a horrible crime against society. We know that in 1034, when Duncan became King of Scotland, there was no established hierarchy that assured the throne to the firstborn child. Bloodshed had been used for centuries to obtain power, and regicide (king murder) occurred with

monotonous frequency in early Scottish history. It was, in fact, an implicit feature of their system of succession.

Therefore, Macbeth, as a cousin to the King Duncan and a powerful general, had as much right to the throne as anyone.

In Shakespeare's time however, right of succession was established as passing from father to eldest son. The succession of James I from Queen Elizabeth, however, challenged this accepted belief, and the chaos created when Elizabeth died without declaring an heir must have been similar to the chaos created by Macbeth's murder of Duncan. In this manner, Shakespeare was dramatizing a real concern of his society through the metaphor of history.

Shakespeare was perhaps a bit too realistic in one other aspect of



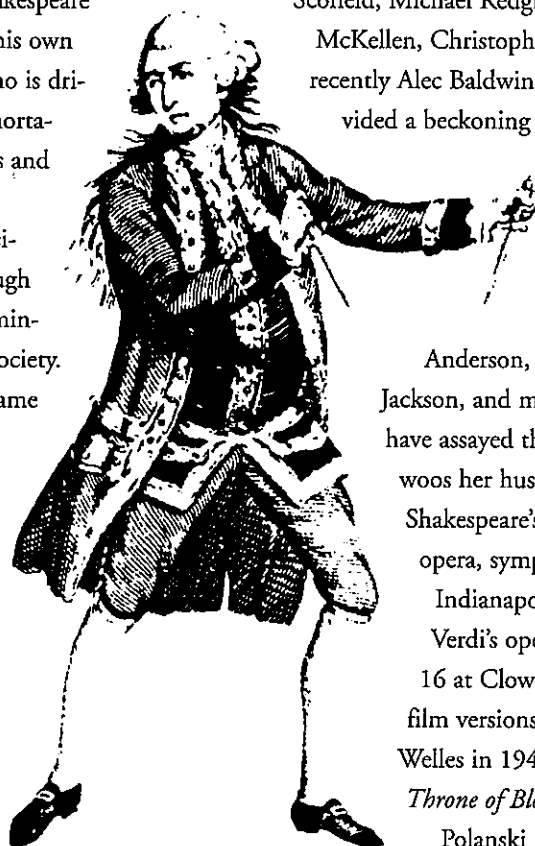
Macbeth and Banquo meet the three witches. Woodcut illustration from Hollinshed's *Chronicles*, 1577.

the play: the witches' incantations are thought to derive from an actual medieval witches' spell. Consequently, hundreds of horror stories abound about mishaps during rehearsals and performances of the play. No one knows just when *Macbeth* developed the reputation it holds among theatre people for being jinxed, but the play, which is whisperingly referred to in theatrical circles as "the Scottish play," is treated with caution and respect.

Macbeth has drawn the attention of generations of leading actors: from David Garrick, Edwin Booth, and Henry Irving, to John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Paul Scofield, Michael Redgrave, Alec Guinness, Ian McKellen, Christopher Plummer, and most recently Alec Baldwin, the Scottish king has provided a beckoning challenge. Lady Macbeth

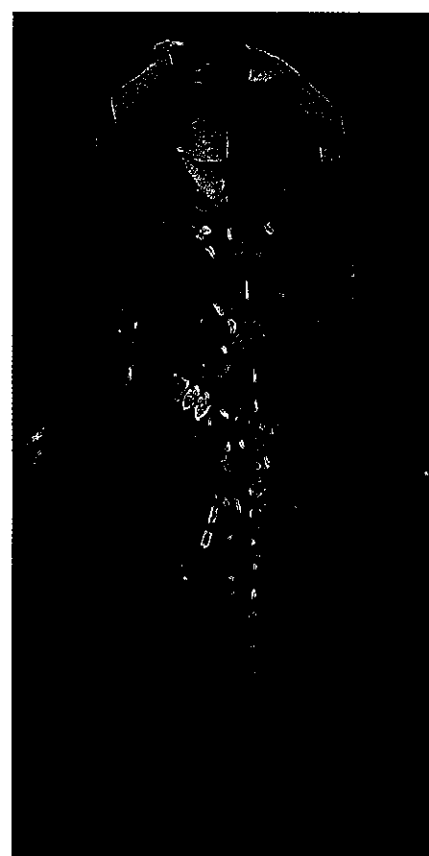
has also attracted the attention of leading actresses through the centuries: Ellen Terry, Sarah Siddons, Judith

Anderson, Vivien Leigh, Glenda Jackson, and most recently Angela Bassett have assayed this spirited spouse who woos her husband into bloody tyranny. Shakespeare's play has been adapted for opera, symphony, and ballet; the Indianapolis Opera will present Verdi's opera *Macbeth* May 14 and 16 at Clowes Memorial Hall. Notable film versions include those by Orson Welles in 1948, Akira Kurosawa (titled *Throne of Blood*) in 1957, and Roman Polanski in 1971. ★

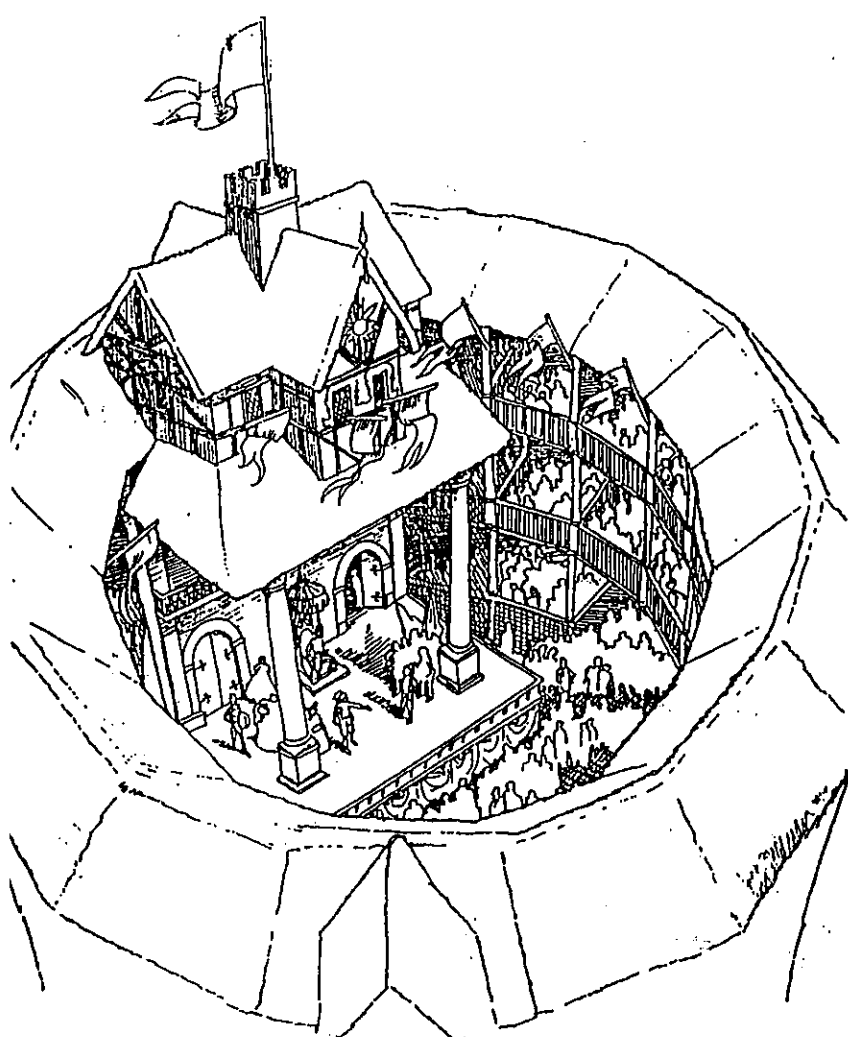


(above)
David Garrick as Macbeth in the mid-1700s.

(right)
Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth, painted by John Singer Sargent in 1888.



(left)
Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.



A World of Images

Macbeth offers some of the most skillful writing and magnificent poetry in dramatic history. The play is a work of extraordinary compression. There are no subplots to intrude on the thrust of the tragic action, which is relieved only by a single comic moment in the Porter's drunken ramblings following the murder of Duncan. The compact dramatic construction of the play is further heightened by the playwright's careful use of verse. The bulk of the play is written in the usual iambic pentameter or five-stress rhythm. An example of perfect iambic pentameter is contained in Macbeth's first line:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

Shakespeare establishes an eerily hypnotic tone by writing the witches' scenes in trochaic tetrameter, or four-stress rhythm. An example is contained in one of their lines that echoes the image in Macbeth's line above:

Fair is foul and foul is fair.

Shakespeare weaves a tapestry of interlocked images in *Macbeth*. Here are a few that recur throughout the play, gaining resonance through their profusion:

Blood

Few lines pass in this play without words that evoke blood; it is used repeatedly to suggest the essence of life, a precious liquid, the spilling of which means treachery.

Wine & Drink

Lady Macbeth, Duncan's servants, the Porter—all suffer from the abuses of alcohol; Macbeth toasts Banquo and his ghost appears. Alcohol is treated as a destructive force that unnaturally alters man's senses.

Night & Darkness

Many images collide in the play that suggest the horrors of the night. Almost the entire play takes place at night when shadows loom and strange sounds echo hauntingly across the landscape. Darkness (in the form of blindness) is invoked to cover up sin. Macbeth's is a world upon which the sun seldom shines.

Sleeplessness

"Macbeth does murder sleep"—as Macbeth begins his sequence of murders, he becomes the victim of horrible nightmares which eventually afflict Lady Macbeth too, ultimately driving her to suicide. Sleep is depicted as a balm that heals the innocent and deserts the guilty, leaving Macbeth in a waking nightmare of fear.

Disease & Medicine

Images suggesting disease reflect both sin and Macbeth himself, who becomes the disease from which Scotland suffers. Doctors are curiously inept in the play.

Clothing

"Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?" Macbeth's new honors sit ill upon him, like badly fitting garments; this idea is picked up through recurring images of dress.

Children

Duncan, Banquo, Macduff, even Lady Macbeth, are parents. Only Macbeth is childless, and therefore obsessed with his own ambition: with no heirs to carry on his name, he must triumph himself at all costs.

Lying & "Equivocation"

In order to cover up his crime, Macbeth must lie and continue to lie to insure his own safety. Equivocation—meaning words or expressions capable of having double meaning, used with a view to mislead—is a common practice in this play. Opposites become interchangeable: murder becomes both "foul and fair" and nothing is as it seems. Macbeth, by his own actions, has robbed life and language of meaning: "A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." ★

Shakespeare

Although William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in the English language, little is known of a factual nature about his life. A handful of legal documents verify his existence, but much of Shakespeare's biography has been creatively reconstructed from general knowledge about the historic period and life in that time.

He was baptized in the Church of England at Stratford-upon-Avon, a Warwickshire market town, on April 26, 1564. This fact leads us to believe that he was born on April 23, because it was the custom in those days to baptize children about three days after their birth. His father, John, was a glove maker who became High Bailiff of Stratford, a position very much like our mayor. His mother, Mary Arden Shakespeare, was the eldest daughter of a wealthy landowner. William, with his three younger brothers and two younger sisters, grew up in a middle-class family of good local repute.

sent Shakespeare to London and theatrical fame.

The next fact that exists regarding Shakespeare's life seems to suggest that his path to London was not a direct one: a document dated November 27, 1582, states that at age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. Six months later, Shakespeare's eldest child, Susanna, was born. Two years later he became the father of twins, Hamnet and Judith. Little is known of Shakespeare's life at this time. It is clear that by the early 1590s, however, Shakespeare was very much a part of the theatrical scene in London, although we know nothing of the circumstances by which he left Stratford and his family to become an actor and playwright in the city. In 1594 Shakespeare was established at the center of theatrical activity, for he is recorded as a shareholder, along with Richard Burbage, in the famed Globe Theatre, located on the south bank of the Thames, across from the Tower of London.

Shakespeare wrote 37 plays, several narrative poems, and over 150 sonnets in the next fifteen years. By the turn of the century he was the most popular playwright in London, and his company enjoyed a unique advantage in the city's highly competitive theatrical world. He seems to have attained some degree of wealth and prestige, for he was granted a coat of arms, thus officially making him a gentleman, and he bought sizeable pieces of real estate in and around Stratford with his earnings. His plays also exhibit not only a fine sense of poetry and stagecraft, but an excellent awareness of the political and literary atmosphere in which he lived. These were tempestuous times socially and politically, and Shakespeare used his plays metaphorically to suggest how order could be made out of chaos in a changing society.

By 1604 his company was named the King's Men, for they had attracted the favorable attention of the new monarch, King James I. Their fortunes continued to rise as their plays drew well at the Globe, and the number of command performances at Court began to double and triple. It may be significant that most of Shakespeare's great tragedies—*Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*—were written within the first five years of the new century. It suffices to say that within a single decade, Shakespeare created a wealth of drama, some of it comic, some tragic, such as the world has never seen.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616—his 52nd birthday—and is buried in the church chancel in Stratford. The epitaph carved on his gravestone, perhaps written by Shakespeare himself, reads:

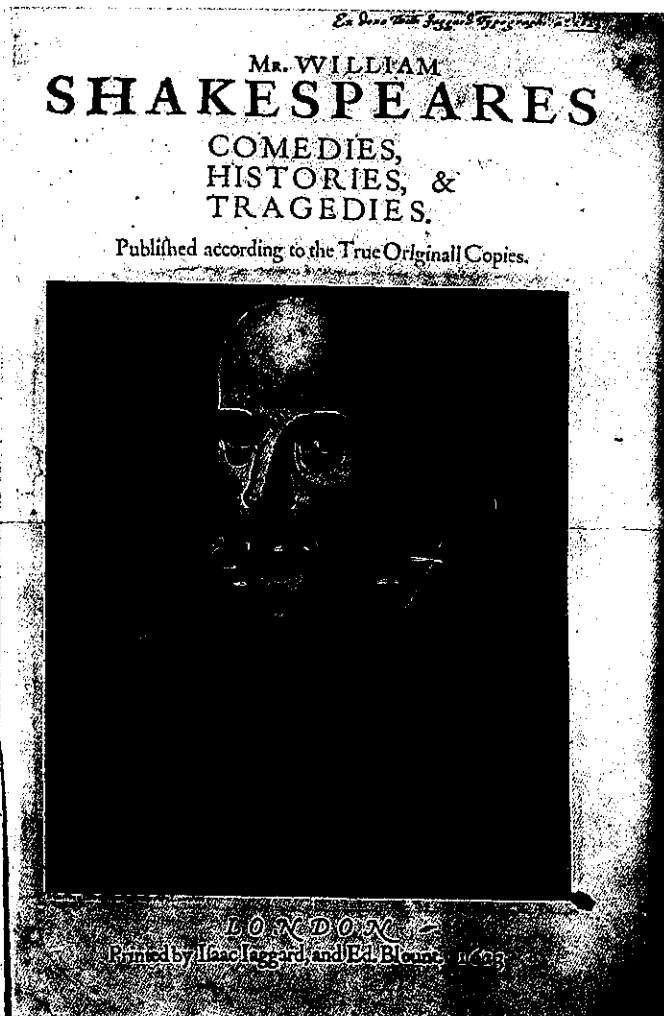
Good friend for Jesus sake forbear,

To dig the dust enclosed here!

Blest be the man that spares these stones,

And curst be he that moves my bones.

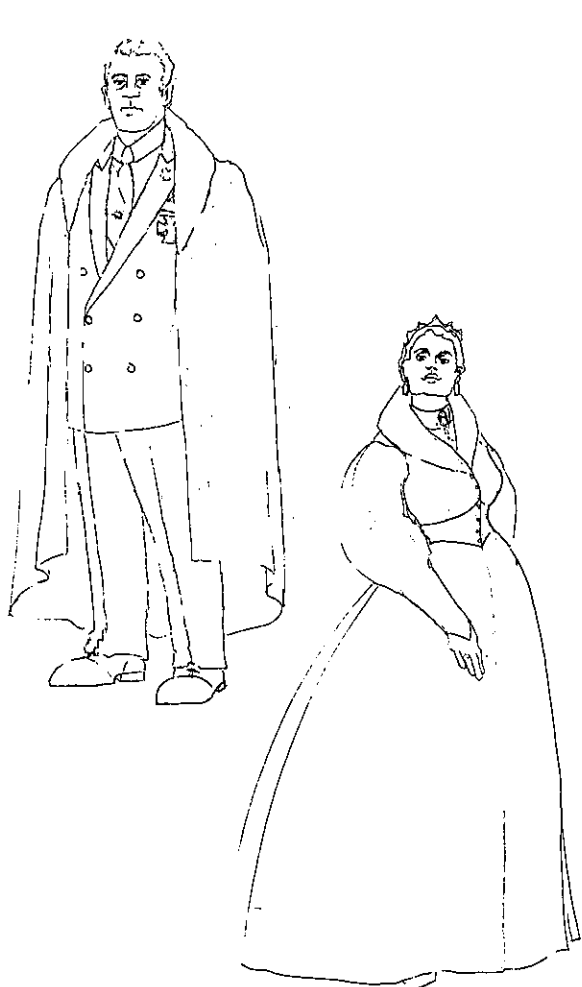
The greatest testament to Shakespeare's genius occurred in 1623, when two of his fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, cooperated with a London printer in publishing a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays. This kind of publication was rare in its day, as plays were valued for their commercial appeal on the stage, with little thought of them as literature to be preserved. It is safe to say that Heminge and Condell reconstructed some of the texts from memory or from a stage manager's promptbook. In any case the first Folio, as this first collection has come to be called, is a document of great historic and literary importance, for it preserved for posterity some of the greatest writing in the English language, allowing us to study and perform Shakespeare's plays over 400 years later and for generations to come. ★



As the son of a leading citizen and public official, Shakespeare would have been expected to go to school as soon as he had learned to read and write. The Stratford grammar school, one of the town's prized institutions, was excellent by comparison to similar schools in bigger towns. School was in session in summer and winter, and students attended for nine hours a day. The curriculum was limited, consisting almost entirely of Latin: grammar, reading, writing, and recitation. It is possible that as an older student, Shakespeare might have had the opportunity to act out some of the classical plays written in Latin as part of a school assignment.

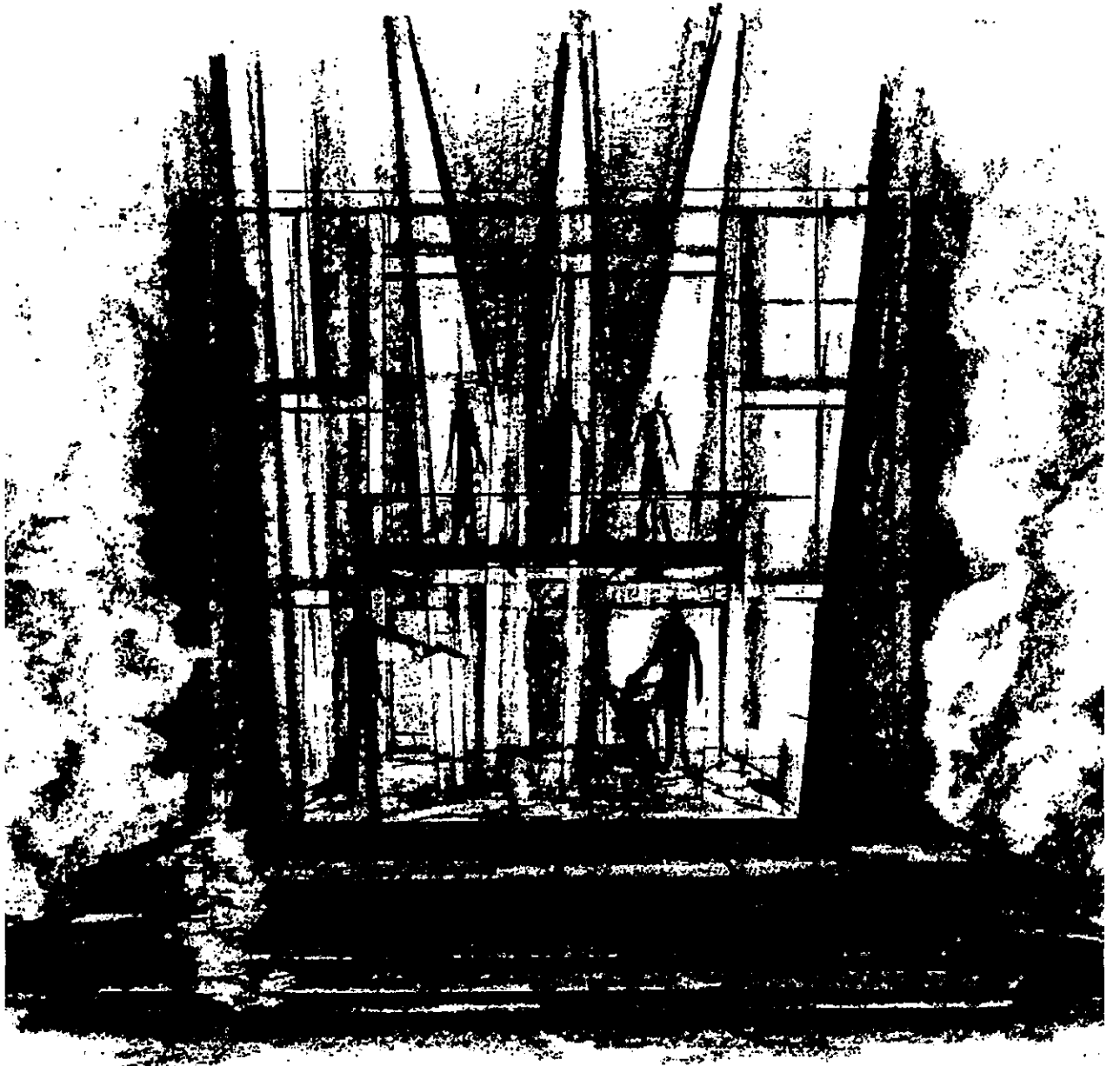
By the time Shakespeare was a youth, many travelling theatre companies of significance had visited Stratford, so it is fair to guess that Shakespeare had seen some of them and admired their art. One of the leading companies was the Earl of Leicester's Men (named after their patron), led by James Burbage, who built the first permanent theatre structure in London when Shakespeare was twelve. Burbage's son Richard was destined to become Shakespeare's future colleague and friend. If one side of young Shakespeare's life was dominated by the stern discipline of school and religious morality, the other suggests the color and enthusiasm of the medieval world. From this contrast must have come eventually the impulse that

Macbeth AT THE IRT



(above) preliminary sketches
for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
by costume designer Jeanette deJong.

(right) Preliminary sketch
by scenic designer Robert A. Koharchik.



Central to associate artistic director Risa Brainin's concept for the IRT's upcoming production of *Macbeth* are Shakespeare's three witches. "The witches personify the dark side of ambition," says Risa. "Desire gone crazy. A dam breaking. We all have the potential to go too far in our pursuits—certainly the Macbeths have it—but desire can only tempt us if we let it. The witches merely present the possibilities to the Macbeths, who make their own choice to follow this dark path."

So Risa sees the witches not as supernatural beings,
but as the things that lure you too far: temptation, desire,

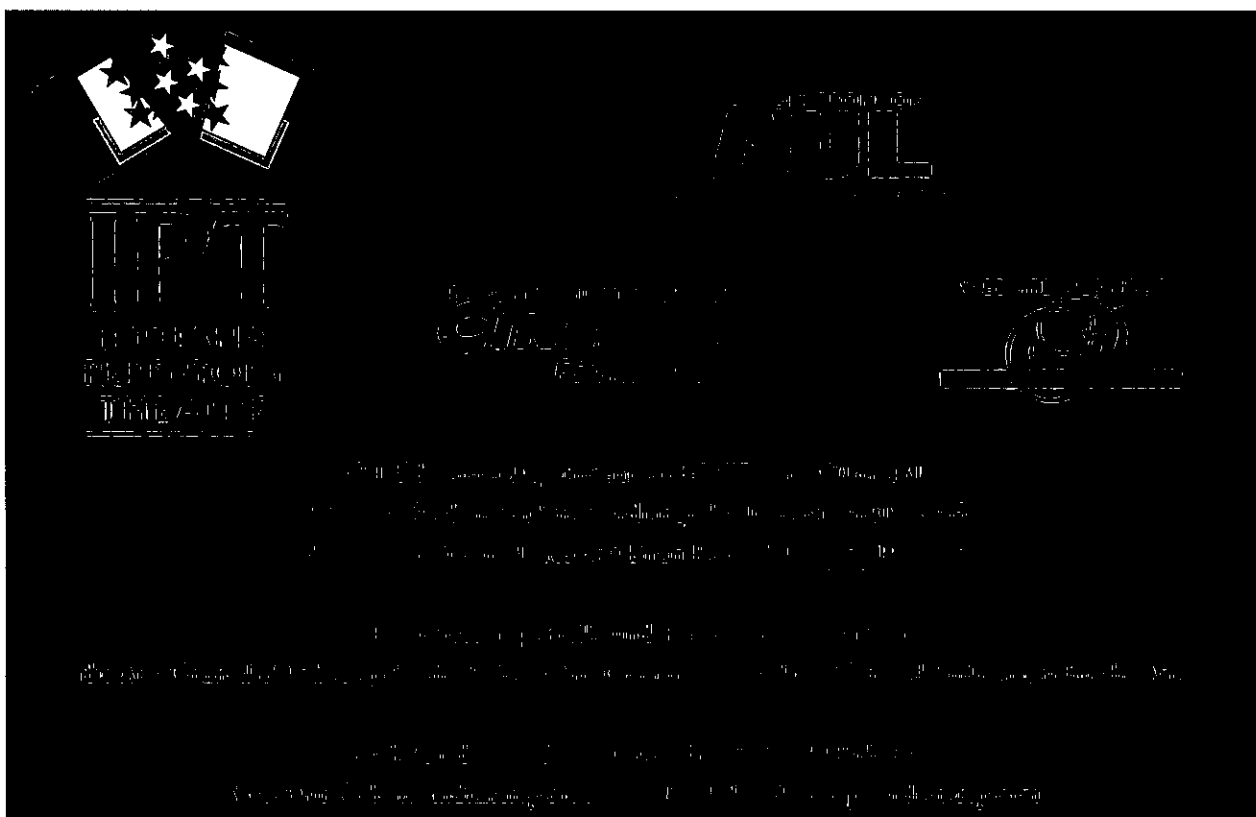
greed. The three figures in this production will suggest contemporary images of rapacious greed, lust, drugs, crime. The same actors will also play servants, so as the play moves along, the Macbeths will feel themselves surrounded by constant temptation.

Robert A. Koharchik has designed a striking set of deep, polished, red marble for the production. From the balcony juts a steel staircase which raises and lowers. At the top of the play, under Duncan's rule, the decoration is rich but classic. As the *nouveau riche* Macbeths come to power, their more ostentatious tastes take over.

Costume designer Jeanette deJong has created a

wardrobe with contemporary military overtones. Army fatigues, uniforms, suits, and evening gowns give the play an accessible, modern look without narrowing the viewpoint to any specific contemporary political situation.

“At the beginning of the play, the Macbeths are not as successful as they would like to be,” says Risa. “They are very much in love, perhaps to the point of codependency. But like so many people of driving ambition, they see only the unreachable heights above them. They feel that their lives are slipping away and they must act now. In the course of the play, they succumb to their desires—at a terrible cost.” ★



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