



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



INTERVIEW: BLOOD, MAGIC, AND TRAGEDY

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm (KN) speaks with director **Geoffrey Kent (GK)** about *Macbeth* in the Illinois Shakespeare Festival's 2020 season. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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KN: *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's most produced plays. What is your history with the play? Can you recall any great moments from productions that you have worked on or seen?

GK: I have performed in the play eight times and fight directed it at least a dozen. I have also directed the play before. It is not so much that I have specific memories of things that have worked or failed in the past—although I certainly do—but more about how to handle the tragedy of *Macbeth* and Lady *Macbeth*. How can you get the audience to participate in a tragedy instead of a melodrama? I think it is easy for any production of *Macbeth* (including many I have been in) to slide into villainy quite early and celebrate the *Macbeths'* evil nature. But I think this does a disservice to Acts IV and V when you really want to, if not care for, at least witness the fall of human beings that did not have to happen if not for their bad decisions. Our production's goal

is to see how long we can keep audiences participating in the journey of the Macbeths before quitting on them.

KN: That is related to the big question that I always bring to the play: is this a human tragedy or a supernatural tragedy? How are these two things related?

GK: That is a fantastic question. I do not think there is a wrong answer there. I have certainly been in productions that lean left or right. I am more inclined to make it human. I do not think that means disavowing magic; I think that Shakespeare puts magic in his plays for a good reason...and sometimes I think it was to sell tickets. But all that aside, there is something supernatural about the play, but I do not think the tragedy is that Macbeth is the victim of the witches. The witches only have three scenes, and after their last scene you never hear about them again. You have to ask who is carrying Acts IV and V, and then aim the play at those characters: Macbeth and, to a lesser extent, Lady Macbeth, because she has less of a voice in the second half. The witches are fueling a person towards something they wanted all along. The real problem is that the person chooses to pursue a path that makes those things happen. And if we cause harm to others to benefit ourselves, the wheel will come back around on that.

KN: I love that phrase, “the wheel coming back,” because I also wonder what is at stake besides the fate of one individual. After Macbeth murders Duncan, there is a scene where Ross and an Old Man talk about all these ill omens.

GK: Yeah, the horses are eating each other. That is an important moment because I think the country itself is rejecting Macbeth.

KN: The universe is out of order because of his crime.

GK: One of the ultimate sins in Norwegian culture during the Viking Age was the idea of killing someone in their sleep. In a warrior culture, to not be able to respond to violence is like denying the gods. We have a world that



Geoffrey Kent
(director)

becomes out of joint as a result of Macbeth doing exactly that.

KN: Since you mention it, I would like to talk about the setting that you envision for this production: Norway during the Viking Age. There is a strong connection to the historical context of *Macbeth* as the Vikings did colonize parts of Scotland in the centuries preceding the events in the chronicles that Shakespeare draws from. How did you first come across this idea and how has it developed?

GK: I took about a month and a half to keep reading the play with a couple of goals in mind. One was to create opportunities for women to participate in the action and larger parts of the story. That is always important to me. The second was to find a world in which magic is a given for its denizens. John Stark and I started looking at Scotland, but it was not quite right only because I was a little worried that kilts and blue paint on the face was going to feel too much like *Braveheart*. I was also still looking for that connection to gender parity. I am a huge fan of the television show *Vikings*, and while I think it is oversimplifying to say, for example, *Henry VI* is like *Game of Thrones* or *Macbeth* is like *Vikings*, I felt that the powerful warrior women and deeply magical culture depicted in *Vikings* both spoke to this play. As you mentioned, parts of Scotland had been settled by Vikings, so a lot of Scottish culture and their beliefs came from Norway—at least in part. As I started exploring Norwegian mythology, suddenly all these massive connections started happening. That is when you know you are cooking with gas. The goal is always for the concept to enhance and clarify the story. Every character believes in gods and fears their wrath. They are also afraid to be outside because things go bump in the night. Stuff crawls out of lakes and comes down from the sky. Trees come to life and grab you. We are not set in a specific town in Norway in a specific year. We are set in a mythological world of Vikings from a thousand years ago that is far enough removed from us: leather and fur, swords and shields, magic and blood. And then we want to add empathy and a tragic fall to that.

KN: Since you are an accomplished fight director in addition to a director and an actor, what does this setting imply in terms of fight choreography? How will this production look and feel different from other productions of Macbeth set in the middle ages?

GK: John Tovar, our fight director, and I want to explore some earthy, brutal action. These fights should not feel like duels, they should feel like brawls. Ultimately, when characters cross weapons, the sword is not just a sword, it is effectively also a big pointy fist. You can expect to see kicking and grabbing and throwing, rather than only dodges, parries, and thrusts—not that any production will only want to do that.

KN: When you describe the fighting as being weighty, it reminds me of how Macbeth compares himself to a bear in bear-baiting at the end of the play.

GK: Interestingly, bear symbolism is huge in Norwegian mythology. People would have to go out with a simple weapon and kill a bear to become a man. That is the thing. You decide on a concept, and then you start finding all this text that supports the world you are in. This is one of them—the symbol of the bear in Norwegian mythology. It is tied to how manhood is defined in that culture. So returning to the play, what does it mean for Macbeth to want to become one? And what does it mean for Macduff to basically kill one? Figuring this out is fun and cool.

KN: I know you have some changes in mind for the Macduff family. Can you give us a sneak peek, knowing that these ideas will continue to evolve?

GK: As I wanted to elevate women in the story, the most iconic role I could come up with for a female warrior was Macduff. I also believe that a man who murders children is best served his death by a mother. I thought that by flipping the gender of that role, we could create more potential for catharsis because Macbeth will be taken down by the woman whose children he murdered. But to do that, we of course

have to figure out the Macduff family unit. Shakespeare's Lady Macduff becomes a male character in our production. I think that he was a warrior at one point but has been wounded. He has either lost a leg or an arm or has PTSD. Something happened to him so that the roles were reversed: his wife took her turn on the battlefield and he took his turn to be the nurturer. So there is this wounded warrior at home teaching their daughter to become the next warrior in the family. That is when the murderers arrive. He is not able to defend his family because of his physical disability as a character, which means the daughter must step forth. In our play, I think young Macduff is almost ready to go to her first war. She is not a baby. I am not saying that she has a big fight scene. But she will have no choice but to defend her family because she is all that is there.

KN: That is interesting because it creates a parallel with Fleance, who Macbeth is worried will try to avenge his father. I am sure you will make more discoveries in rehearsal, but it already seems that Macduff's family has a stronger arc. I am excited to see where these ideas go. Here is my last question. What do you want the audience to feel or think about through this production?

GK: If we succeed, there should be a moment for Macbeth when he is stabbed. There should be an iota of empathy left. Right now, I do not know how you can do that with a person who plans the murder of children. So maybe it is not possible. But that is what we will try, without lightening any of the violence in the play. I think the violence has to be sudden and shocking and terrifying. On the surface, this looks like a straightforward play because there are essentially no subplots. It is short and lean, it is sexy, it has fights and famous speeches in it. But really, *Macbeth* is the story of a couple's tragic fall. And—there but for the grace of God go I—any of us could fall. I am not saying that we are all contemplating murder, but we have all contemplated self-promotion. And how do you self-promote without doing it at the expense of others?

KN: Right. And after making one mistake, how do you pull yourself away and not make another?

GK: We should see ourselves in the Macbeths a little—a loving couple that grabs for something out of reach and in doing so shatters a kingdom. If we can achieve that for the audience, I think we can relate to these characters, or at least understand them rather than distance ourselves and say, “Who would do that?” It is never that simple.