

Things That Go Bump In a Canadian Night

Macbeth's Curse

BY RONALD WOLF

This story is a bit different than my previous stories. It's about a curse hundreds of years old. Believe it or not, it does have ties in Canada.

William Shakespeare was a playwright, poet, actor who died in 1616. He was not the Canadian actor who played Captain Kirk on Star Trek. That writer/actor was William Shatner.

Although their first names are the same and their initials are the same, the two actors and writers are not one of the same. So now we got that out of the way, we can start this true tale of what the men have in common and it's more that their initials.

Shakespeare wrote a play called Macbeth. The Tragedy of Macbeth (commonly called Macbeth) is a play about a regicide (the deliberate killing of a monarch, or the person responsible for the killing of a monarch) and its aftermath. It is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy and is believed to have been written sometime between 1603 and 1607.

In the back-stage world of theatre, some believe that the play is cursed, and will not mention its name aloud, referring to it instead as "The Scottish Play". Over the centuries, the play has attracted some of the greatest actors in the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

The play has been adapted to film, television, opera, novels, comic books, and other media. In 1604 Shakespeare in

his zeal to please King James I, an authority on demonology, cast caution and imagination aside and for the opening scene of Macbeth's Act IV he reproduced a 17th century black-magic ritual, to budding witches. Remember, during this time people were still being burned as witches. Without changing an ingredient, Shakespeare provided his audience with step-by-step instructions in the furtive art of spell casting:

"Round around the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone,
Days and nights has thirty-one Swelter'd venum sleeping got.
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot"
...And so on.

The ritual's practitioners were not amused by this detailed public exposure of their witchcraft, and it is said that as punishment they cast an everlasting spell on the play, turning it into the most ill-starred of all theatrical productions.

Over the years many actors suffered from the curse. During its 1849 performance at New York's Astor Place, a riot broke out in which 31 people were trampled to death. In 1934, British actor Malcolm Keen turned mute onstage, and his replacement, Alister Sim, (Scrooge) like Hal Berridge before him, developed a high fever and had to be hospitalized. In the 1942 Macbeth production headed by John Gielgud, three actors -- Duncan and two witches -- died, and the costume and set designer committed suicide

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amidst his devilish Macbeth creations.

So how does this have Canadian ties and how does Shatner fit in? In the town of Stratford, Ont. Stratford Shakespeare Festival has been attracting visitors since 1953. The festival is based on Shakespeare's plays and writings. Shatner got one of his first big breaks in the festival in the early 50s.

Even today, the Shakespeare festival walks on egg shells when it comes to the play Macbeth. They strongly honour the curse and refers to Macbeth as "the play" or "The Scottish Play". The festival opens this month in Stratford.

Stories about Things That Go Bump In a Canadian Night may not always have their start in Canada but they might have ties here.

