

Macbeth: Directors Note

General Style and Approach

We are aiming for an intimate, psychological study of characters with this production, playing on themes of uncertainty and security (or lack thereof). I am keen to avoid the play being a piece about 'ambition'. I think this oversimplifies what is really happening in this story, as well as the characters and their situations.

This is a world at war. For as much as Duncan is praised, we open in the middle of a bloody rebellion against him that suggests this king was not as benevolent as advertised and establishes that for the characters of this play, life is rarely stable. Their rulers are questionable, wars are frequent and security is lacking. Thanes know they could be sent to a war at the drop of a hat and be killed. Their wives know their husbands could not return home and leave them with nothing. If they have children, this could either secure their future or be another factor of concern. Favour can be moveable, with titles taken as easily as they are given. People cling to their titles and their favour and leverage them as much as they can. Everyone's base level of stress is high.

There is the opportunity for most of the roles to be played as either gender. The descriptions below are guiders on the style of performance but adjustments can be made if we decide to cast against the given gender. All roles will be cast colour-blind. With allowances made for characters whose ages are dependent on those of other characters (such as Malcolm to Duncan and Fleance to Banquo), roles will be cast age-blind. There are a multitude of ways Macbeth, for example, can be played, with him either at the start or the end of his career, with each option providing different nuances that we will determine guided by the strength of auditions.

Macbeth

Macbeth is an effective soldier. The first thing we learn about him is how he has cut a man in half on the battlefield. These are not actions that leave you without scars and Macbeth *is* scarred. While they did not have a term for it, today we would recognise that he suffers PTSD and as bold as he is on the battlefield, Macbeth is a patchwork of traumas held together by increasingly fraying nerves. He has married for love and relishes in the support he experiences from his wife, but in doing so he has lost the legacy that children would have offered (though at first he seems hopeful that such a legacy is still within grasp).

Performances to be inspired by: Anthony Stewart Head in Repo! The Genetic Opera, Michael Fassbender in Macbeth (2015), Peter Sarsgaard in Jarhead, Ian McKellen's Macbeth-mash-up in Ian McKellen on Stage.

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is not a Disney 'evil Queen'. She is not a murder-happy manipulator poring evil into an otherwise lily-white husband. That said, she *does* know how to influence her husband. She has been dealing with helping him function through PTSD and she is good at it and it is easy enough for this to fall into open manipulation when needed. She is a woman who has survived her own great traumas and pains and is desperate to alleviate the constant strain on her and her husband by seeking lasting security. Underneath all of her bravado, she is a woman driven by her fears – fears that only expand as her situation worsens.

Performances to be inspired by: Judi Dench in Macbeth (1979), Jasmine Cephas Jones in Blindspotting, Philippa Woo in Hamilton.

Seyton

Combining the roles of the Doctor, Old Man, Hecate, Porter and Seyton into one character, Seyton is the Rasputin of Macbeth's court. Quiet and somewhat sinister, he is a closed book and his motives known only to himself. This is a man who follows where the favour is and waits for that favour to rot. Seyton is not the impetus or the cause of the evil in Macbeth's court, but he relishes in it.

Performances to be inspired by: Terrance Zdunich in The Devil's Carnival, Anton Lesser in Game of Thrones, Michael Fassbender in Prometheus.

Banquo

While Banquo is as esteemed on the battlefield as Macbeth, he appears, outwardly at least, to bear fewer scars from his experiences. Banquo is a man who has found a way to 'leave his traumas at the door' when he returns home, helping him to make sounder decisions as he doesn't base them on fears. His experience is an inverse of Macbeth's. He has a child, but not a partner. The greatness he is promised is out of reach and thus less corruptive to his mind. Banquo is the sort of man who would be asked to be a Best Man several times over in his life. He is jovial, loyal and loving.

Performances to be inspired by: David Thewlis in Harry Potter, Tom Hardy in Inception.

Macduff

If Macbeth is the protagonist of the play, Macduff is the hero. This is a man who is driven by his moral compass more than his ambitions or fears, but this can blind him to dangers and perhaps make him act in haste and put himself or others at risk. Macduff has a strong idea of how the world should work and is respectful of hierarchies only when such hierarchies support moral justice and rightness. He has a strong and genuine love for his family and a sense of security that suggests his life has had the security that the Macbeths' has lacked. In many ways, Macduff represents what Macbeth could be if he found himself on firmer footing.

Performances to be inspired by: Brendan Gleeson in Gangs of New York, Cillian Murphy in Peaky Blinders.

Ross

Ross is an esteemed soldier who has grown weary of the battlefield and would prefer an administrative role. He is a man who has managed to hold advisory and honoured roles in both Duncan and Macbeth's courts and manages to keep such a position when he defects to Malcolm, showing how highly his talents are regarded. While we do not see his own family on stage, Ross is a family man and one who understands the importance of juggling both the demands of the front lines and the home front and does his best to keep both sweet.

Performances to be inspired by: Phil Davies in Whitechapel.

Lennox

Lennox is a man just trying to get by. He doesn't care for the tyranny of Macbeth but he is cautious of defection or outward criticism until he knows rebellion is backed by England and shows a chance of success. He is ambitious, but safely so, wanting to remain in positions where he is secure rather than seeking a wobbly crown.

Performances to be inspired by: Charles Dance in Alien³.

The Witches

Far from bearded and warty hags, these Witches are elemental. Stoic, disinterested and perhaps even uninterested, their motivations are not so much unknown as unimportant, following in a vein of the Ghost of Christmas Past that their prophecies 'are what they are, do not blame me.' These Witches are 'bubbles of the air', pieces of shadows; unbidding and unbidden. Like the weather, most of the time they are mild and almost unnoticeable, but when there is a storm, it is seismic.

Performances to be inspired by: Kelly Craig in 300.

Malcolm

Malcolm is a young man full of bravado, if not real bravery. He presents as somewhat cocksure and has the quick and somewhat overzealous responses of a young man keen to impress and come across as a tough and strong leader that fall a little short, betraying his real lack of experience. For all of this, Malcolm is a virtuous man and will probably grow to be a good leader under the right influences. He is not ambitious but accepts that the crown and leadership of rebellion has fallen to him and that he needs to rise to that call.

Performances to be inspired by: Anthony Ramos in Hamilton (Act 2).

Duncan

While his virtues are spoken about at length, these praises should be taken with a pinch of salt. The play begins with open and bloody rebellion against Duncan – hardly a vote of confidence. Duncan is probably not a terrible man, but that doesn't make him an efficient ruler. He is out of touch with his soldiers and probably too assured of his right to rule to bother worrying about how to improve his performance.

Performances to be inspired by: Anthony Hopkins in Thor.

Lady Macduff

Well-matched to her husband, Lady Macduff is his moral equal and someone able to keep him on his toes. She is outspoken when she needs to be, but remains fiercely loyal to her husband, even if she doesn't always agree with him. She is a devoted and doting mother, as well as someone strong enough to hold to her loyalties and her viewpoints in the face of danger.

Performances to be inspired by: Dolly Wells in Dracula.

Fleance

One of the roles that very easily lends itself to being played as either male or female, Fleance is the child of Banquo. Fleance is on the cusp of adulthood and as yet innocent of the realities of the world the murder of their father will hoist them into. For their lack of experience, Fleance is clearly resourceful, making their way to Malcolm in England for security from Macbeth as much as for a sense of revenge. If played as female, Fleance will then be able to leverage this desertion into favour and find themselves a husband in the new king that will begin Banquo's line of succession. If played as male, there should be the suggestion of a potential for Fleance to one day become a usurper to Malcolm's crown.

Performances to be inspired by: Sophie Turner in The Staircase.

Additional Speaking Roles:

Caithness (Thane)

Angus (Thane)

Servant

Soldier

We may also have need of additional non-speaking roles to assist with larger scenes or backstage crew doubling-up where needed to set and strike while also appearing part of the action.