

YOU NEVER SAY THE SCOTTISH PLAY

TEN-MINUTE PLAY

By Gary Peterson

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SYNOPSIS: While waiting for an audition, three experienced actors attempt to explain the superstitions behind Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, to an actor trying out for the first time.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(THREE MEN, TWO WOMEN)

ALEXANDER, a veteran actor *(42 lines)*

BERNARD, an experienced actor *(41 lines)*

CHLOË, a seasoned actress *(31 lines)*

DANIEL, a novice actor *(30 lines)*

EVELYN, the producer *(1 line)*

PRODUCTION NOTES

1. This is not so much a play, or even a “play within a play,” as it is a play waiting for a play to happen. It can be performed by itself, of course, but might be best as a “warm-up” to another play, or one in a series of short plays.
2. The producer role at the end of the play may be portrayed by either a man or a woman. Use EVAN if a man, EVELYN if a woman, however:
3. If desired, the actors may use their actual first names, rather than arbitrarily selected A, B, C, D, E names given. This is particularly effective if the actors are well-known to the

theatre presenting the play, as it will then seem more spontaneous and immediate.

4. Chloë uses “sugar” as a sweet substitute for a much saltier word. She may linger on the “sh” initial sound of it to emphasize this.
5. The “Ritual Round” that closes the play is meant to be very farcical. The actors should be seen spinning and running and doing the routine in a comical fashion. The head pats are described as being in iambic pentameter. True kudos if you manage to get that idea across to the audience!

Setting:

This very stage in this very theater, bare save for four chairs at a table.

Time:

Audition night for the upcoming season.

AT RISE:

ALEX, BERNARD, and CHLOË are discovered onstage, sitting at the central table, quietly reading from various stage playbooks, each in their own world. ALEX is in the upstage right chair, BERNARD in the downstage right chair, and CHLOË in the upstage left one. The downstage left chair is vacant.

DANIEL: *(Entering.)* Is this where the tryouts are being held?

ALEX: *(Looking up.)* This is it! Auditions for the _____ *(He says current year.)* theater season.

BERNARD: No one's here yet.

CHLOË: *(She looks around the table.)* All evidence to the contrary.

The THREE chuckle.

ALEX: *(To DANIEL.)* Want to join the cattle call? C'mon in and wait with us!

DANIEL: Great! Thanks! I'm new to this acting thing.

BERNARD: *(Wide eyed.)* Ah! New grist for the mill!

DANIEL: *(To BERNARD.)* Hey, I know you! I saw you in *King Lear* last year. *(He quotes King Lear, imitating how he'd seen BERNARD do it, which was very melodramatically.)* Blow winds, and crack your cheeks!

BERNARD, very pleased, comes and stands right next to DANIEL, and the two continue in tandem, using large voices and similar hand movements.

BERNARD and DANIEL: *(Together.)*

Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes!

Spout 'til you have drenched our steeples! *(They laugh.)*

BERNARD: *(He shakes DANIEL's hand.)* You know, I think this guy has a future in the theater!

DANIEL: Your name is . . . *(Searching for it.)*

BERNARD: Bernard.

DANIEL: I'm Daniel.

ALEX: And I'm Alexander.

CHLOË: (*Looks up from her book briefly.*) Chloë.

DANIEL: Anyone know what shows they're putting on this season?

CHLOË: No idea.

ALEX: Well, they typically do one musical, one comedy - -

BERNARD: - - And one Shakespeare! I'm hoping for *The Tempest*.
(*He quotes.*)

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep. (*He sits.*)

ALEX: Oh, you'd make a good Prospero.

BERNARD: Thank you!

ALEX: I myself am hoping for *As You Like It*. (*Pause.*) I like it.

BERNARD: Just so long as it isn't *The Great Dane*.

DANIEL: You mean Hamlet.

ALEX: Yeah, Hamlet.

ALEX, BERNARD, and CHLOË: (*All rising suddenly, they quote Hamlet, by rote and in unison.*)

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles!

BERNARD: (*As they return to their seats.*) That speech has lost all meaning through overuse. Pity.

ALEX: But no plays have been announced yet. They could pick Coriolanus!

CHLOË: (*To DANIEL.*) Don't worry, they won't. They'll pick something better known than that.

ALEX: (*Pointedly to her.*) Like R & J?

DANIEL looks confused.

BERNARD: (*Stage whisper to DANIEL.*) Romeo and Juliet.

DANIEL: Oh.

CHLOË: I wouldn't mind. What actress doesn't dream of playing Juliet?

ALEX and BERNARD: (*Mockingly put their heads side by side and quote in tandem.*)

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?

CHLOË: (*Defending.*) By which she's musing that if his name were different, there'd be no problem.

ALEX: There'd be no play!

BERNARD: Right. She's a Capulet; he's a Montague. That's the conflict.

ALEX: Their families are enemies.

CHLOË: (*She stands, and speaks to DANIEL as if he were Romeo.*)

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;

Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.

What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,

Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part

Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!

What's in a name? That which we call a rose,

By any other name would smell as sweet.

ALEX: (*Moved, actor to actor.*) That's very nice, Chloë.

CHLOË: (*Modestly.*) Thank you. As you say, R & J would be wonderful. But playing Rosalind in *As You Like It* would be great too. (*Quoting, again to DANIEL.*)

No sooner met, but they looked

No sooner looked, but they loved,

No sooner loved, but they sighed; (*SHE sighs.*)

No sooner sighed, but they asked one another the reason,

No sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy.

ALL FOUR chuckle, DANIEL embarrassedly so.

BERNARD: (*To DANIEL.*) Is this your first tryout?

DANIEL: Yeah. Does it show?

ALEX: We've all been there.

CHLOË: You'll do fine. Sit down. (*CHLOË returns to her chair and DANIEL takes the empty chair downstage left.*)

DANIEL: I don't know, I feel rather foolish.

ALEX: Ah! (*Quoting.*) The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.

DANIEL: (*He knows the quote.*) That's from *As You Like It!*

ALEX: Indeed! Very good!

DANIEL: Oh, I've read all of Shakespeare's plays, and I'm familiar with most of them, but this is the first time I'm going to try and act in one. You all seem to know the plays cold.

BERNARD: Well, we're actors. We love the theater! After all, (*Quoting.*) the play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. (*Apologetically.*) *Hamlet.*

ALEX: Or how about - - (*Quoting.*)

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances - -

CHLOË: - - which is also from *As You Like It.*

DANIEL: (*Not to be outdone.*) I know one. (*Quoting.*)

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.

The other THREE react in horror. DANIEL notices this and the rest of his speech is slower and more wary.

DANIEL: It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

The others are silent.

DANIEL: What? What is it? Did I say it wrong?

BERNARD: You quoted 'The Scottish Play'!

DANIEL: I did what now?

ALEX: 'The Scottish Play'!

CHLOË: He doesn't know.

BERNARD: We never quote 'The Scottish Play'.

CHLOË: Not in a theater.

ALEX: It's bad luck.

DANIEL: (*Confused.*) 'The Scottish Play'??

The OTHERS pause, uncomfortable.

ALEX: Who's going to explain it to him?

CHLOË: (*Scoffs.*) Not me!

BERNARD: (*Generously.*) I'll do it. (*To ALEX and CHLOË.*) I'll do the ritual of penance afterward.

DANIEL: Ritual of whatsits??

CHLOË: You do this ritual to counteract the bad luck of . . . of the play.

ALEX: I'll keep count for you.

BERNARD: (*To ALEX.*) Thank you. (*To DANIEL.*) Um, you see there is a long-standing theater tradition - -

CHLOË: It's a superstition, really - -

ALEX: But everybody observes it, and nobody flaunts it.

BERNARD: Yes. The tradition states that one certain Shakespeare play is bad luck for actors. You simply don't quote it, as it brings on the bad luck.

CHLOË: Except if you're performing it.

ALEX: Apparently, actors find it's not bad luck if you're paid for it.

DANIEL: (*Light dawning.*) Ohhh! You're talking about Mac -

BERNARD: (*Quickly.*) - don't say the name!

ALEX: Even the name is bad luck, supposedly.

CHLOË: We used to call it "Mackers" in my old company when we talked about it.

ALEX: "Mackers"; I like that. We used "Mr. & Mrs. M."

BERNARD: Can I tell this story? Anyway, yes. (*Resigned to explaining it.*) The "Scottish Play" is a euphemism for (*Pause, very cautiously.*) *Macbeth*.

ALEX: That's one.

BERNARD: Yes. Now, *Macbeth* - -

ALEX: Two.

BERNARD: - - is considered bad luck because it has ghosts and
witches - -

CHLOË: - - particularly the witches.

ALEX: This play was written in the early 1600s. They took their
witches seriously.

CHLOË: It's not like Hallowe'en.

ALEX: Yeah, the Salem Witch Trials were still 90 years away!

BERNARD: Shakespeare purportedly watched actual witches doing
incantations, and he transcribed them into the play. Supposedly,
that makes the play - cursed.

*There is a pregnant pause. DANIEL is now deeply engrossed, and
the veterans spring a trap.*

ALEX, BERNARD, and CHLOË: *(Suddenly, all together, and at
DANIEL.)* BOOOOO!

EVERYONE laughs, and the spell is broken.

BERNARD: So any time an actor says, *(Pause.)* "Macbeth" - -

ALEX: Three.

BERNARD: - - Or quotes from *(Pauses to show he is using the
euphemism purposefully.)* "The Scottish Play," he or she must do
a ritual of penance to undo the bad luck.

DANIEL: *(Getting it.)* Oh! So I have to do one, because I quoted it.

BERNARD: Yes. And I have to do - three is it?

ALEX: Three.

DANIEL: What do I do?

BERNARD: You must get up from your chair, *(DANIEL does.)*
quote a certain line from Hamlet, "Angels and ministers of grace
defend us!" - -

DANIEL: *(Dutifully.)* Angels and ministers of grace defend us!

BERNARD: *(Continuing.)* Then turn around at least three times, *(DANIEL begins spinning.)* and ask permission to return to your group. *(As DANIEL spins.)* It helps if you pat your head in iambic pentameter. *(DANIEL begins to pat his head, while turning.)*

DANIEL: *(To help himself do “iambic pentameter” whilst spinning, he intones quietly.)* Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph!

ALEX: *(As DANIEL continues spinning.)* Wait! We didn’t do that at the Abbey Theater.

BERNARD: Well that’s what we did with the Beautiful City Players. What did you do?

ALEX: *(To the obedient DANIEL, who has now stopped spinning and faces the group.)* Turn your head to the left. *(DANIEL does so. Standing as he is, his head faces the audience, over his left shoulder.)* Now, spit. *(DANIEL prepares to spit into the audience.)* Not a little one, kid! Really hock up a good clammy one! *(DANIEL snorts and makes faces, preparatory to launching a huge spit into the audience.)*

CHLOË: Stop it. *(To DANIEL.)* These guys are just razzing you, Danny.

DANIEL: *(Mouth full of saliva.)* They are? *(He swallows.)*

CHLOË: You really do have to do a penance, but you can do a fake stage spit. Like this: *(She demonstrates a saliva-less “spit-take,” over her left shoulder, facing into the wings.)* Ptoooie! Anyway, we had a simpler method over at the Charter Playhouse.

BERNARD: Oh?

CHLOË: All you had to do was knock on a wooden surface, *(She indicates the table.)* like this one, while spelling the name backwards.

DANIEL: What name backwards?

CHLOË: Macbeth! *(Instantly realizing she’s said it, she swears mildly.)* Oh, sugar! *(She then begins knocking on the table, while spelling.)* H-T-E-B-C-A-M!

ALEX: (*While CHLOË spells.*) I like the spitting better. (*To BERNARD.*) But you're right about saying "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" We did that as well.

CHLOË: (*Finished spelling, she acknowledges the others.*) Thanks for reminding me! Angels and ministers of grace defend us!

ALEX: (*To BERNARD.*) Well, are you going to do your ritual of penance?

BERNARD: Yes, but you know what they say - - (*He noisily pushes back his chair and moves to a spot stage right on the downstage curtain line. Quoting.*) If it were done when 'tis done,

ALEX and BERNARD: (*Together finishing the line.*) Then 'twere well it were done quickly! (*He stands up. To BERNARD.*) That's four, now!

BERNARD: And one for you!

CHLOË: (*Resigned to it.*) Oh, sugar! Why not? (*CHLOË stands up, too. Quoting.*) What's done cannot be undone!

DANIEL: (*Clueless.*) What??

BERNARD: (*He begins reciting Macbeth.*) When shall we three meet again?

ALEX and CHLOË join him at the curtain line.

ALEX, BERNARD and CHLOË: (*Speaking in chorus, with all the same body movements.*) In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

That will be ere the set of sun.

Where the place?

Upon the heath.

There to meet with - - (*Pause, they look invitingly at DANIEL.*)

DANIEL: (*Joining at the curtain line.*) Macbeeth. (*He pronounces it with a Scottish accent, so that it rhymes with "heath."*)

CHLOË: I come, Graymalkin!

ALEX: Paddock calls.

BERNARD: Anon!

ALL FOUR: *(In perfect unison and simultaneity.)*

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air! *(Various cackles.)*

They all now perform the various rituals in the form of a “round,” very quickly doing each part.

BERNARD: *(The furthest stage right in the lineup, he begins the round.)* Angels and ministers of grace defend us! *(He does a “spit-take” over his left shoulder, which is in the direction of ALEX.)* Ptoooie!! *(He then runs to the table and knocks, spelling backwards.)* H-T-E-B-C-A-M! *(After that, he dashes back to his place in line and begins spinning, patting his head in iambic pentameter.)* Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph!

He will keep spinning until EVELYN speaks.

ALEX: *(Second in line, he wipes his eye and begins his first ritual directly after receiving the “spit-take” from BERNARD.)* Angels and ministers of grace defend us! *(He does a “spit-take” over his left shoulder, which is in the direction of CHLOË.)* Ptoooie!! *(He then runs to the table and knocks, spelling backwards.)* H-T-E-B-C-A-M! *(After that, he dashes back to his place in line and begins spinning, patting his head in iambic pentameter.)* Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph! *(He will keep on spinning until EVELYN speaks.)*

CHLOË: *(Wipes her eye and begins her first ritual directly after receiving the “spit-take” from ALEX.)* Angels and ministers of grace defend us! *(She does a “spit-take” over her left shoulder, which is in the direction of DANIEL.)* Ptoooie!! *(She then runs to the table and knocks, spelling backwards.)* H-T-E-B-C-A-M! *(After that, she dashes back to her place in line and begins spinning, patting her head in iambic pentameter.)* Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph,

Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph! (*She will keep on spinning until EVELYN speaks.*)

DANIEL: (*Wipes his eye and begins his first ritual directly after receiving the “spit-take” from CHLOË.*) Angels and ministers of grace defend us! (*He does a “spit-take” over his left shoulder, just as EVELYN enters, who receives the brunt of it and reacts to it.*) Ptooie!! (*He then runs to the table and knocks, spelling backwards.*) H-T-E-B-C-A-M! (*After that, he dashes back to his place in line and begins spinning, patting his head in iambic pentameter.*) Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph, Ta-dumph! (*He will keep on spinning until EVELYN speaks.*)

EVELYN: (*Wipes her eyes as she stands and stares at the four spinning ACTORS, then.*) I don't know what comedy you four are rehearsing, but I'm pleased to announce this year's Shakespeare play will be . . . *Macbeth* . . .

ALEX, BERNARD, CHLOË, and DANIEL: (*Simultaneously stop spinning, and at the same moment shout in chorus.*) Angels and ministers of grace defend us!

THEY do a “spit-take” over their left shoulders, right at EVELYN. As they run back to the table to knock, *THE CURTAIN FALLS, fast!*

THE END