ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2010 Production of *Macbeth*

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Featuring: Kymberly Mellen (Lady Macbeth), Grant Goodman (Macbeth), Don Burroughs (Banquo), Quinn Mattfeld (Malcolm), Lillian Castillo (First Witch), and Michael A. Harding (King Duncan)

Flachmann: Welcome to the culminating event in our Wooden O Symposium, the Actors' Roundtable Discussion on Macbeth. I'm going to take you right from the frying pan into the cauldron and remind the actors that in our November design meetings, our director, Joe Hanreddy, told us that our witches would not have any supernatural powers in this production. He described them as "psychic groupies, sweet-looking young girls, but not well-kempt." [laughter] We envisioned them as people who could suggest but not control events. I'd like to know from each of the actors how this initial design decision to deny supernatural powers to the witches affected your role specifically and the production in general.

Mellen: That was actually very helpful at the beginning. Joe Hanreddy suggested that I look at a book called *The Masks of Macbeth* by Marvin Rosenberg, which has huge, multiple chapters for Mr. M and then Lady M detailing all the different ways these characters have been presented throughout the years. So I read all the way through and said to myself, "Oh, if Joe goes this way, I can make these choices, and if he goes this way, I can make these choices." So when we came into the rehearsal room, I was very grateful to be given those parameters, because I think you

find extended freedom within limitations. It helped especially with the "Come, you Spirits" speech, because I knew that was not going to be an incantation or spell. And it really helped make our production almost a domestic drama about a marriage gone bad. Without supernatural forces controlling each of our lives, the play became about choice and consequence, shame and guilt, self-loathing and paranoia, and how all these affect your immediate relationship with the people you love.

Flachmann: Thank you, Kym. We're off to a great start. Grant?

Goodman: I had worked with Joe before, so we had the advantage of being able to talk about the play four or five months ahead of time. When Joe came to me with that concept, I was very happy to hear it because, first of all, in Holinshed's source material, the Wayward Sisters are not described as "witches." They are exactly how Michael [Flachmann] introduced them: women on the fringe of society who have lost everything and have turned to this "religion" as an alternative. I think that if they don't have supernatural powers, the play focuses more precisely on the question of fate and free will. Often times in productions of Macbeth, they are puppet masters. For example, I've seen the witches holding the dagger. I've watched productions where they were always on stage. If that's the case, it's not a very good play because you don't really care what the guy does because it's all clearly orchestrated by someone else. That's why I'm so fascinated with the line, "If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me / Without my stir." At that moment, he believes it to be true. It's not until he returns to Inverness and finds out that his wife has been having these same thoughts that the reality of murder becomes a possibility. The witches' ability to suggest action is more important than any actual power they may have.

Flachmann: Thank you, Grant. Lillian?

Castillo: The other witches and I were unaware of the fact that we wouldn't have any specific powers until the day of the first rehearsal. We were so excited because we got to shift from a "magical" to a "religious" point of view. They believe in these spiritual powers like other people believe in Jesus or Buddha. We had the opportunity to explore what that religion meant to the three of us. Each one of us approached it differently, yet we still worked together as a unit. Joe really wanted us to make sure that

we were still separate. He said, "This is your religion. The three of you practice it together, but you all feel it differently." This concept also allowed for the incantations to be more like prayers than spells. We were asking a greater power to make events happen for us. We don't have that power to make things happen, which I loved because the play became more of a psychological thriller. Once we planted this seed, once we gave Macbeth this information, we were curious what he would do with the knowledge. That's the way I approached the non-magical wayward sisters. [laughter]

Flachmann: So you see that directorial decision as making your characters more "human" in the play?

Castillo: Yes, absolutely. These young women have their own little congregation instead of their own little coven. [laughter]

Flachmann: Excellent. Thank you for clearing that up. Don?

Burroughs: I'm glad Grant brought up the topic of free will. Is evil something that is acted upon us, or is it something that we possess within ourselves? I like the idea that we are all capable of it because Banquo and Macbeth are both together in this; we both receive the same prophetic greeting. Banquo is suffering the same torn consciousness about what he wants to do concerning the revelation from the witches. Grant and I discussed this a lot, and we felt it was important for us to be equally capable of such an evil impulse. Banquo says, "Merciful powers / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose." When I'm resting, when my mind is allowed to wander, I wake up in this dream urging me to seize the throne. I personally find it more interesting that an external power isn't leading me down that path. There is always the hope of redemption in a Christian world, even right before your death. No matter what you have done, you can always find redemption. So we have to think that at any point, Macbeth might turn around and change his direction in life. This is especially true when I come back as the ghost. Grant and I discussed this, too. The ghost is saying, "stop." I'm not there to scare him; I'm there to save him. When you're on stage, you have to play specific actions, so I imagine I'm saying, "Look what happened to me. My sin was the thought of killing Duncan. That was my sin, and look at what I'm suffering in the afterlife." Nothing comes out but this horrific sound, and he doesn't see that I'm trying to save him.

Flachmann: Thank you so much, Don. Quinn?

Mattfeld: Are there witches in this play? [laughter] We have no interaction with them. In a sense, we are normal characters in a normal world. Any great play or work of art that has elements of horror will always include one or more characters who don't see that horror. Since I don't see the witches, I have no idea that they exist. This is not a "supernatural" play for Malcolm. I don't think the witches affect him one way or another.

Flachmann: So you are basically clueless? [laughter]

Mattfeld: Yes, and not only about this question. [laughter]

Flachmann: Thank you, Quinn. Michael?

Harding: One of Duncan's lines that intrigues me is "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face." As Grant was saying, this is really a play about personal choices and how we live our lives, and this is how I see Duncan. Every decision you make is a gamble, with its positive and negative consequences. This kingdom is falling apart, and what Joe and I focused on was the fact that the king had made a lot of bad decisions about whom he was going to trust. He's fallen into this political whirlpool, and everyone around him is being sucked in. I find it rather ironic that he names Macbeth "Cawdor" right after Cawdor has betrayed him. And then he visits Macbeth's castle for a while, which is a really bad decision. [laughter] All these personal choices make the play much more interesting, tangible, and relevant, as opposed to a situation where these people are dealing with a force they can't control.

Flachmann: Very good. Thank you, Michael. As you can tell, these exceptionally bright and highly committed actors are very much involved in helping to guide the direction of our productions. One topic we often discuss in our rehearsals is character "arcs," and I think most of us would agree that a character who doesn't change much from the beginning of the play to the end is not terribly interesting. I see wonderful "arcs" in all your characters in this production. In fact, I've had great talks with Quinn about the loss of humanity and the pursuit of power in the play and equally intriguing conversations with Grant about the downward psychological spiral that his character goes through. Would anybody like to talk about your arc in the show?

Mattfeld: Yes, I think Malcolm has a huge arc in the show. Joe Hanreddy described Malcolm as a strange mix somewhere

between Henry V and Hamlet. When the play begins, he's certainly not ready to be next in line to the throne. He's stunned when Duncan announces him as the Prince of Cumberland. The way we're playing it in the show, no one is expecting that to happen, and it does. The very first monologue I have is to Duncan about Cawdor being executed, and Malcolm is entirely taken aback by Cawdor turning traitor. I realize then that there's absolutely no one you can trust. I realize I have to be capable of severe cruelty. By the end of the play, you've got somebody who is ready to be king and has probably learned as much from his father about trusting people as he has from the title character about what he must be capable of doing to maintain power. So I think Malcolm has a huge arc from the beginning to the end.

Flachmann: Lovely. Thank you.

Harding: What's tricky about an arc is that you can't know as a character where you're going before you get there. We all have to live in hope that we'll be successful in the end. Duncan can't know, for example, that he's going to die. Although we have an overall arc and we can see from point A to point Z, each beat in between is a miniature arc, even in the smallest moments. People who say there is no subtext in a play have not read this play. This experience was very different because Joe Hanreddy spent a lot of time around the table making certain we were all in the same world. That's what makes a great production: If all your arcs intersect, the story is told in a creative and dynamic way.

Flachmann: Thank you. Grant?

Goodman: I did a lot of reading and research, and everything I read depicted Macbeth as a murderous tyrant, a heinous villain. I didn't understand why we would want to watch that kind of character for five acts. If you don't like him, it's a very long play. The critic Harold Goddard made a comment that seemed perfectly sensible to me: Which of us hasn't been to the precipice after doing something horrible in our life. We either step away from that precipice or go ahead and commit the act for which we will be forever regretful. I think that is why we watch Macbeth: Because he is like us. Hopefully, we were trained not to make the bad decision he makes. If he becomes a brute and fights his way through fate, I don't think that's what the play is about. I also don't think the play is necessarily about ambition. He uses the word "ambition" once.

And when he does use it, it is "vaulting ambition" that he's talking about: ambition that is misplaced. However, he uses the word "fear" forty-eight times. That's why we decided to go with this wounded animal image. At the end of the play, I chain myself to the throne and go down with the ship essentially. I wanted to focus on his arc, which was being haunted by his remorse over what he has done: killing the king; killing his best friend, Banquo; killing the Macduffs. I think if he had ascended to the throne naturally, he would have been a good king, a good leader. He is a war hero; he has saved his country. And I have to believe he would have been a strong leader were it not for this seed the witches planted in his brain. So I wanted to focus on his downward psychological spiral. Kym and I also wanted them to be a very loving couple. Harold Bloom says they are the happiest couple in Shakespeare. Of course, it doesn't end well for them! [laughter] But he calls her "my dearest partner of greatness." I don't think there's a more loving line in all of Shakespeare.

Then you have to talk about the childlessness, which we approached early on with a series of violent e-mails back and forth. I'll let Kymberly talk about that in a moment. But we did have to make a decision about the enigmatic lament, "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me." Unfortunately, I have a friend from high school who lost a child at about age three, and I think that when a couple experiences the loss of a child, it either drives them apart or it brings them together with an amazing bond. We wanted to take the second route—that the loss of their child has really bonded them together. That's why I have her in my arms at the end in the "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech. We wanted to make sure in the audience's view that we would be together through eternity, that we were linked indissolubly. So that's the way Kym and I approached the relationship, which was a better place to operate from than the sexual jealousy or sexual politics with which I have often seen their relationship portrayed.

Flachmann: Excellent, Grant. Kym, do you want to talk about Lady Macbeth?

Mellen: Instead of a mutual blame game, it seems to me like a mutual guilt game. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth take the guilt for not only their actions, but also for the destruction they see in the person they love. Macbeth wouldn't have killed Duncan

if it weren't for Lady Macbeth's encouragement. She thought that's what he wanted, and she urged him on because she thought he deserved the crown. He would have been an amazing king, but as she sees him unravel, she does, too. We talked about the Kennedys and other golden couples. We wanted to have a very precipitous fall from grace. The audience doesn't have to like us, but we wanted them to understand the choices the Macbeths make and to vicariously realize the consequences of those choices, some of which cannot be atoned for—that no matter what kind of apologies or personal restitution we try to make, there are certain things, like murder, that "cannot be undone."

In my own approach to acting, I try to bring 95% of myself to the character, with the only difference being the circumstances of time and place and upbringing. Personally, I have a very clear moral base and strong religious background. I worry about the hells that we create for each other, about how the devil connives to make us as miserable as he is. I wanted to depict the personal hell that people make through their own choices. If Lady Macbeth had been able to see at the beginning of the play the damage her actions would do to other people, specifically to the children, she would never have encouraged that first murder. The loss of her children is at the root of her sadness and psychosis. I don't think she would bring that kind of pain to another young parent. Ironically, what Lady Macbeth destroys is precisely what she yearns for: a family of multiple children with strong and loving parents. Of course, she doesn't have this realization, and her actions with their resultant guilt catch up with her.

Flachmann: Great. Thank you for sharing with us how you make these roles so personal, so much your own. We have a controversial, but I think very effective, moment at the end of our first half and the beginning of our second half when Grant, during the banquet scene, does not see the ghost of Banquo, and then we pick up the same scene again after intermission, where he does see the ghost. I wonder if Grant or Don could talk about that a little bit—the way we begin to see the play through the Scottish king's eyes and also how the third witches' scene becomes a kind of a dream sequence.

Goodman: I love what we do. We get a reprise of the banquet scene at the beginning of the second act, so I get to have my cake and eat it, too. [laughter] When Joe first told me about this

idea and said there wouldn't be a ghost at the banquet scene, I was immediately fascinated. After the intermission, the audience is thrust into looking at events from my point of view, because nobody else on stage can see the ghost but them and me. For me, it becomes a very interesting acting challenge. Because it's my job, you have to believe that I see the ghost before the intermission. You see that I'm starting to unravel. But after intermission, you come back and get to see what I've been seeing, so you're with me now, inside my head, and you're seeing what I have just seen from my point of view. But as Don was saying earlier, it's a bit of a duet between the two of us, as he has come back to scare me into changing my ways, like Jacob Marley. From that point on, you are invited inside my mind so you can experience my downward psychological spiral. And we bleed immediately into the witches' scene right after that, where these visions are planted in my mind. I did a lot of research on sleeplessness, and I think Shakespeare pre-dated Freud. I read a book called *Insomnia*, which is about insomniacs. Everything that Macbeth experiences is a classic case study in insomnia. It gives you tunnel vision, which he clearly has. You lose a lot of short-term memory, but you gain a more vivid long-term memory so events that have happened in the past come into much sharper focus.

Flachmann: Don?

Burroughs: When Banquo is killed, he reappears within seconds, literally. I have less than a minute before I come back on stage, so there isn't really a lot of time to create any kind of stage effect that isn't just going to look cheap. In addition, most people are familiar with this play. It's taught in a lot of schools, and almost everyone has read it. Our production allows you the privilege of seeing this relationship in the afterlife; we understand what the character is going through after death, which I think is a brilliant choice by our director. And the ego in me loves the extra stage time! [laughter] All this facilitates the fascinating shift in perspective that Grant has described. So actually I'm a big fan of this choice, because I think it helps drive the story forward and makes you sit on the edge of your seat and engage in the second half of this wonderful play.

Flachmann: Thanks, Don. Lillian?

Castillo: I love it for many of the same reasons. When he meets the witches at the beginning of the show, he puts them

inside his mind. He knows he can be as powerful as he makes himself. I adore the fact that he forecasts his own future and sees the witches as a dream that makes him feel powerful.

Goodman: I'm also intrigued with the bad dreams I'm having. The dagger is the air-drawn dagger that he gives to Duncan. Since these are psychological projections, we wanted to place the cauldron scene in the same realm as the dagger scene, which makes this a psychological thriller as opposed to a story about a tyrant who hacks and slashes his way out of some bad decisions.

Flachmann: I'm interested in how the actors were impacted by some of the other directorial decisions. For example, the apparitions don't actually appear, and we have a rather stylized forest. You talked a little bit, Grant, about being chained to the throne at the end, and we haven't mentioned yet the crown the witches give Macbeth.

Goodman: The crown of thorns is certainly Biblical. It's great to have something tangible that the witches give Macbeth to remind me as a character and you as an audience of that prophesy. It's wonderful to have that overt symbol there for you to see, especially at the end when I have it in my hands and realize that this whole quest for power signified "nothing." Joe made some great choices that rendered the ideas palpable, which is why I chained myself to the rickety, old, decayed throne at the end of the play. We wanted to focus firmly on a psychological study of the play. I'm also glad my head isn't cut off at the end. And no, I don't have black hair. People have asked why I don't have black hair. Nowhere in the text does it say that Macbeth needs to have black hair. That's for the record! [laughter]

Flachmann: Quinn?

Mattfeld: My personal opinion is that the great playwrights are the ones who present questions and dilemmas as opposed to answers. This play opens itself up to a lot of interpretations that do not bastardize the text at all. I think Joe did a wonderful job of making these very informed decisions, and he was extremely respectful about using the actors and our ideas, as well. There are several different directions you could go with these plays. That's why we are doing them 400 years later and doing them so differently each time.

Harding: I especially love the scene between Malcolm and Macduff in 4.3. I was profoundly moved when I saw how Joe

had set it in a monastery. He made some very bold decisions that opened up the play. Haven't most of us at some point dealt with a quest for something bigger than ourselves, whether it be religion or mortality. And Joe tapped into that universal yearning by staying away from witchcraft, which opened the door for further exploration of the text while still being true to what Shakespeare wrote.

Flachmann: Excellent. That's a great segue into talking about the best Malcolm/Macduff scene I've ever witnessed.

Mattfeld: In our production, Malcolm's departure to England is a kind of religious retreat, which allows him to contemplate whether he's still interested in being King of Scotland. It's a fantastic choice. The transition of going from the murder of the Macduffs into that scene is supported by that beautiful choral music, which introduces this almost cinematic discussion between the two characters. When Malcolm is in the monastery, we realize that God, family, and Scotland are the most important things in his life. Setting that scene in a monastery fuels the action and gives us something tangible to hold on to—the crown. All of a sudden, it becomes a scene about this crown of thorns: This is just debris from a tree that they put together, and all of a sudden it has this mystic power. We hold on to these things in real life because we give them the power that Lillian was alluding to earlier.

Goodman: We are interpretive artists. I tell my students there are 206 bones are in the human body. This is an important analogy I use when teaching—We all have the same number of bones in our bodies, but the way they are fleshed out is always different. That's the reason we still do Shakespeare's plays. They're perfect skeletons, ideal in every way, but the way we flesh them out is up to us. That's why no production at the Utah Shakespearean Festival is ever going to look the same. How we interpret each show is always going to be different. And that is why, 400 years later, we are still doing these brilliant plays: They hold all the different types of flesh with which we dress them.

Flachmann: That's beautifully said. I'd like to move into history for a few minutes and ask whether Duncan was a weak king.

Harding: Before I became truly knowledgeable about my craft, I used to take my history from Shakespeare, which was a

big mistake. As a dramatist, he necessarily compresses time, creates characters, and makes other changes for the sake of his art. Historically, Macbeth wasn't a bad king. Shakespeare had his political reasons for depicting Macbeth the way he did since he wrote the play for King James, who was a supposed descendant of Banquo. We didn't want to make him this incredible warrior king, which of course is not historically accurate. So we decided to highlight his emotional side and illustrate how the consequences of his choices actually weakened him as a king. He was almost too human, and we saw him getting caught up in his own mistakes and the bad choices of the retainers around him. Even though Shakespeare's Duncan isn't historically accurate, we decided to take some aspects of history and incorporate them into his characterization.

Flachmann: Let's talk a little more about the placement of Lady Macbeth in Macbeth's arms after her death, which has reminded many audience members of Michelangelo's Pieta.

Goodman: That was an image Joe had in his mind from the very beginning. If Macbeth is to have any redemptive qualities at the end of the play, they probably should come from the "yellow leaves" or the "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speeches. Now I see the "tomorrow" speech as a descent into nihilism. The arc of the speech becomes greater because I have the cold reality of her death in my arms. There is no "tomorrow" for us. There is nothing left: This is what we all must come to. Then I hope the speech takes on a slightly different meaning, which veers into remorse, guilt, and sadness. All our "yesterdays," all our hopes and dreams and plans have come to nothing. I think it's a beautiful image.

Flachmann: When do you actually decide to kill Duncan?

Goodman: I'll let Kymberly answer this, but we decided that there's a missing scene. I come home to Inverness and say, "Duncan comes here tonight." She asks, "And when goes hence?" to which I reply, "Tomorrow, as he purposes," after which she says, ". . . never / Shall sun that morrow see," which means we are not going to let him leave there alive. But no final decision is made in that scene. When I come back on for my "If it were done when 'tis done" speech, a decision seems to have been made, because when she comes in she implies that I have already sworn to kill

Duncan. The bargain, the compact, is made off stage. There's no mention of witchcraft in that scene whatsoever. What she says is that the time is right. Nothing in that scene says I have to do this because the witches told me so. That's never expressed.

Mellen: Nor does Lady M ever use that as an argument, which I found very interesting. I say, "You promised me. You're the one who started this conversation. You said you wanted the throne. I've done everything but stab him." The best acting advice I've ever gotten is that consistency in characterization avails you nothing. Contradiction is everything. To make any character on the page multidimensional and human, all you have to do is play the contradictions from millisecond to millisecond. Wanting my husband to seize the throne is a very "human" emotion for me to have.

Flachmann: A final question, if I may: What is your biggest fear as actors?

Mellen: I don't really have any fears, but I do sometimes have regrets. Looking back, sometimes I can say I was tired at that moment, or my partner was giving 200%, and I only had 10% to give him. But rather than fear, let's talk hope. Hope is the opposite of fear. My hope is to be fully present in each moment, having done all the textual preparation so that memorization is not an issue. My job is to serve my partner. My job is not to act, but to react. The energy that my partner throws back to me will energize the scene. My personal goal is simply to be present and be open and be receptive to whatever the moment brings me every night. Consistency is not the goal at all. It's process, not product.

Flachmann: Any other terrible fears?

Burroughs: Forgetting your lines. It's a classic.

Castillo: One of my biggest fears, and I've actually seen it happen to someone else this summer, is having to edit Shakespeare on the spot. Monica Lopez has a change in The Merchant of Venice into her boy costume, and one night the change didn't happen on time, and she has all these lines about being dressed as a boy, which I had to ad lib for her till she came on stage. So that's really my biggest fear.

Mattfeld: When my lines go out of my head, they don't just go away and wait for a while and then come back. They get on a plane to Cincinnati and start a dry cleaning business. [laughter]

They are never coming back. This is such a feral art form; it's so fleeting, and it can go away at any moment. And every time our contract runs out, we have to sign up for unemployment, and we wonder if we're ever going to do another one of these plays again. [laughter] That's what the real fear is: That this beautiful, wonderful, glorious theatrical moment in my life is going to go away and never come back.

Flachmann: Thanks, Quinn. I think that's the first reference to dry cleaning we've ever had in one of our Actor Roundtable Discussions. [laughter] I would simply like to close by saying that as hard as these actors work and as brilliant as they are, we still need you as audience members to make this exceptional theatrical experience complete. We thank you so much for being here and for supporting this wonderful festival. [applause]