

## **WRITERS' NOTE ON THIS ADAPTATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY, 'MACBETH'**

This version of 'Macbeth' is an adaptation of the original folio text to the medium of film.

Immediately, in switching from one medium to another, the adapting writers faced many decisions. To simply reproduce every line and move from the play would have removed the chance of an image-oriented, cinematic approach.

Film is essentially story-telling with movement and light, sound and music. Though it is designed to provide a rich emotional response, those four elements are all film medium is composed of, technically. Think about it, there really is nothing else to it.

On stage, one has considerable control of lighting and sound but on film, the control is immensely busier. Movement, on stage, is limited to the dimensions of the theatre itself. On film, the camera and the actors can go virtually anywhere, as can the audience's directed point of view of the unfolding action. And because the medium can equally manipulate movement through time, the fourth dimension can be exploited too.

The plasticity of the film medium in space and time, is the key to its power. There are, however, certain problems in film that must be solved. Because the medium is so very expensive, it's important to get returns on investor's money and find as big an audience as possible.

This means you will market the film to an ever-broadening body of ticket-buyers. The broader you go, the less patient, on average, an audience mood becomes. In other words, the filmmaker must try and cater to mass tastes and enter the genre world of film.

Film genres are merely 'labels' that an audience recognizes so they know what to expect from the film product. Genres make the life of the marketing people and the audience much easier. It is a kind of shorthand language.

Even films that bend or blend genres still rely on an understanding of genre, whether it is romance, horror, crime thriller, comedy, period drama, whatever. It is only by understanding the labels that one can appreciate mixing or updating them.

Of course, it's possible to make a film of the play set in the period indicated in the text. However, this would become a hyper-expensive costume drama shot in Scotland or Europe, and beyond the reach of films backed with limited Australian funds. It seemed like a logical call then, to translate 'Macbeth' to the cinematic form of the contemporary gangster story, the genre of 'crime thriller'. After all, the original story was filled to the brim with crime.

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The feudal pecking-order of the play's characters is oddly mirrored in the hierarchy of organized crime today. Guns, and sometimes knives, would replace swords, while expensive vehicles would replace horses.

Further to that, the adaptation deliberately culled references to many 'anachronisms' and constantly looked for chances to link the play to a contemporary setting, pace and imagery.

When Banquo goes out riding with Fleance, they use trail bikes, when Macbeth dispatches Macdonwald he uses a gun and a knife. And while we're on the subject of Macdonwald's fate, it's worth noting that in the play that action happens off stage. In the film, we actually see the clash with Macdonwald's forces which are, in this case, a modern street gang.

Roman Polanski begins his film version of 'Macbeth' with a clash of mounted armies because he realized that the battle was not to be missed. It would be impossible to mount the battle in any but a symbolic way on stage. On film, though, not only is the battle possible, it's essential to lend the movie a kinetic excitement that is described, but not seen, in the stage production.

Another contemporary spin on the folio text lies in the scene where Lady Macbeth reads a letter delivered to her from a messenger. The letter has been written by Macbeth, it arrives home before he does and describes his encounter with the witches. Since 'messengers' are not normally used in the twenty-first century, we simply took the words from the letter and placed them in Macbeth's mouth. In any case, the plot moves forward in a similar way. At this point, it might be worth outlining a very considerable extrapolation from the play.

In the folio text, in one of Lady Macbeth's exchanges with her husband, she tells him that she has 'given suck and knows what it is to love the babe that milks me.' Really?!!! Where is this child now? What happened to it?

We can only presume that the child has grown up and left home, or, more likely, the child has died, but from what causes we'll never know. Our version of 'Macbeth' takes the idea of a dead child. We imbue Lady Macbeth's early scenes with a pervading sense of grief over the loss of the child which results in a good dose of 'self-medication'.

Another departure from tradition takes place with the witches (the Weird Sisters).

Because we don't actually believe that our modern Macbeth (the character) would believe in witches, we addled his head with drugs and made the witches more intriguing - to him - as young vixens. A criminal Macbeth in our time is far more likely to be led astray by sexy young witches than old hags. Nevertheless, our witches perform exactly the same fatalistic function as the ones in the play.

Other scenes or ideas in the play were changed to provide a 'contemporary' momentum. For example, there are many exchanges between the witches that may add colour or intrigue on stage, but simply do not advance the plot. So we dropped those.

Likewise, the famous Porter scene was cut out entirely. Though it's a truly marvellous moment, the Porter's exchange with Macduff delays our arrival at the scene of Duncan's murder. It wasn't advancing the tension of our crime genre vision, which is what we were 'selling' to the broader audience.

It's interesting to note that the Porter scene was probably designed by Shakespeare to get his leads off stage so they could change clothes and have a brief 'breather'. On film, of course, no such diversion is necessary.

Other devices we employed were an overall reduction in the number of speaking parts and, in some cases, genders and relationships were changed altogether. Such is the case with Malcolm's brother, Donalbain.

This character simply doesn't appear in our version and is replaced with a female companion who Malcolm has brought along as a date. Nevertheless, she has some of Donalbain's lines and plays an integral part in Malcolm's escape from Macbeth's house.

Though the film has many roles, the play has significantly more. Dialogue from peripheral characters was often rolled up and given to a character who was already well established. Because many of the lords are often just 'faces' to create a sense of wider society on stage, this wasn't a difficult task.

Whole alliances and agendas that do not appear in the play were implied visually - or with juggled lines - in the film.

Caithness and Menteith, for example, are just two more Scottish lords on stage, but in our version they are conspiring cops who become very critical characters.

Their encounter with Malcolm in a restaurant in our film has absolutely no equivalent beat in the play.

However, we bent the lords to suit our purposes which were, in fact, to set up a modern day equivalent of 'the English forces' that ally with Malcolm and his cause. In our version, the police - Detectives Caithness and Menteith - are taking Malcolm's side and assume the same pivotal role as Shakespeare's English army.

There are more examples of this sort of thing in the film such as the inclusion of Fleance at the invasion of Dunsinane.

In the play Fleance simply doesn't do this, but because of the repetition of the father/son axis throughout the story - Banquo and Fleance, Macduff and his son, Siward and Young Siward - we felt we were only playing with a theme

already permeated in the story. In our film, Fleance represents the future, the next generation, but of course, he does in the play too!

Traditionally, Macbeth, even on stage, has one element that is widely open to all sorts of inventive speculation. This element lies with the murderers.

Normally operating as a pair, the murderers are joined by a vague third party at the scene of Banquo's ambush. In the Polanski film this ill-defined character was assumed to be treacherous Ross, in the BBC television version, the third party is Macbeth's man, Seyton.

It's almost as if Shakespeare is saying to anyone who mounts the play, "there, I've set the scene for you, now you put in the details." Which is all part of his genius.

In our case we dropped the third man altogether, he seemed to make no difference to the overall outcome of the scene (as far as we were concerned). On the other hand, the ultimate fate of the murderers, left unknown in the play, is something we as filmmakers were drawn to. Polanski had Macbeth toss the men into a dungeon after their failure to kill Fleance.

In our version, they run away, into the hands of Macduff. This seemed like a satisfying thing to do after they'd destroyed Macduff's family. The dialogue that the murderers have in the capture scene with Macduff was actually written for other characters, yet it seemed to oddly suit the murderer's downfall. Their fate made for a good, tense 'modern' scene, a visual opportunity not to be missed.

Many other conceits and alterations have been entertained in this version. All of them were made to compress, bend, underline or speculate according to our personal vision and 'updating' of the story.

Did we go too far? Should people 'mess' with classics? That can only be answered by whether you find the finished result engaging or not. We hope you do.

Geoffrey Wright and Victoria Hill, August 2006.