



MACBETH

STUDY COMPANION

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Staging Shakespeare's work professionally in 2026 involves many considerations. The purpose of presenting this play is not solely to help school students experience it, although that is important, but also to showcase an exceptional piece of writing by our national playwright. Theatres aim to bring Shakespeare's universal characters and themes to modern audiences and demonstrate how they speak to the world today.

This commitment to making the work resonate with contemporary audiences, combined with a director's vision and practical factors such as cast size and touring requirements, often means that changes are made to the play. These changes may be practical, such as reducing the number of actors; ethical, such as updating problematic language; theatrical, such as finding ways to stage the supernatural; or creative adjustments that ensure a play written over 400 years ago connects clearly with a modern audience.

As part of developing this production of *Macbeth*, the director met online with a large group of GCSE English teachers from across the country to learn what they needed from a staging of one of the UK's most studied set texts.

The teachers agreed that changes to the script or artistic decisions should support students' understanding of the play rather than cause confusion. Following this discussion, the theatre committed to producing this resource: a study companion that explains the creative choices which differ significantly from the original text. This will make clear what is unique to this production and should not be mistaken for the original play.

Teachers can read this resource before attending the performance to prepare their students or share it directly to support learning.

The next section is written by the production's director, Mark Babych, who has also adapted the play.

We hope that reading his vision and using this study companion will make you as excited to see the production as we are to create it. This is an opportunity for thousands of audience members, young and old, across the country to fall in love with Shakespeare's work and to see clearly how it speaks to the world we live in today.

**Tom Saunders, Associate Director,
Hull Truck Theatre**



DIRECTOR'S VISION

I have been asking myself what, in the world today, inspires me to tell this story at this particular time. I am interested in exploring its contemporary relevance and resonance. Specifically, I have been influenced by current global conflicts that seem difficult, or even impossible, to resolve. I am thinking about places such as Ukraine, Gaza, and other regions where resolution feels out of reach, and how this impacts the lives of ordinary people.

For this production, I have considered how best to tell this story using Shakespeare's language, and what edits or interpretations I can make to the existing text to bring it to life for a modern audience.

There is also a practical consideration: we have ten actors to tell this story. This has necessitated edits to the script so that multiple role-playing makes sense. In particular, I have chosen to amalgamate the characters of Ross, Angus and Lennox into one character: Ross. Lines have been reassigned to this character, and for the purpose of the story we are telling, Ross's journey has been developed. In the original play, Ross is a relatively minor character, but by combining these roles, I hope to give Ross a more substantial and meaningful presence.

Further to this, I wanted Lady Macbeth to appear more sympathetic in my production so that we understand her descent into mental ill-health because of guilt. In our version, she may be present in more scenes than the original play, listening in to conversations that she normally wouldn't be present for. I believe it is important to avoid the misogynistic tropes that sometimes surround this play, which often place more blame on Macbeth's ambitious wife than on him - the man who commits murder and begins a path towards tyranny.

As our production reflects the setting of a contemporary war zone, you will see the presence of guns on stage. We have also adapted certain references from swords to blades, which does not alter the rhythm of the line but is more accurate for the weaponry used in our staging. Lines referring to horses have been cut, as they do not fit within the world we have created. Further to this, there are moments in the

play where the witches appear alongside body bags. This is intended to highlight the brutality of war and its victims, placing the story firmly within a context that feels urgent and real. Along the way, there are small edits and cuts that we will not list individually, but all are made with the aim of clarity and coherence.

**Mark Babych, Artistic Director,
Hull Truck Theatre**



NOTES ON OUR PRODUCTION OF *MACBETH*

This version of Macbeth is being produced by Hull Truck Theatre, Octagon Theatre Bolton and Derby Theatre. It's Written by William Shakespeare and Directed by Mark Babych.

This guide explains the differences between our production and Shakespeare's original text. It has been published before the play opens and will be updated if further changes are made.

Overall approach

- The journey of Macbeth remains mostly unchanged.
- One of the witches appear more often than in the original play and shapeshifts into different characters in Macbeth's life.
- Ross, Lennox and Angus have been combined into one character called Ross, who has a unique journey.
- Lady Macbeth overhears Macbeth planning the murder of Macduff's children and attempts to save them.



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SPECIFIC NOTES ON THIS PRODUCTION

Act I, Scene 3

- In the original, the witches speak about a sailor from Aleppo to show their vengeful nature. In our version, this section is repurposed to refer to Macbeth, who is approaching with Banquo. Lines have been reordered, cut and edited to make the witches seem as if they are foretelling Macbeth's fate before meeting him, and to show them revelling in their dark arts.
- Banquo's line about the witches having beards has been removed, as it does not fit our aesthetic vision. The original line likely reflected the staging of Shakespeare's time, when the witches were played by boys in women's roles and beards may have been used to make them appear more "unnatural."

Act I, Scene 5

- One witch shapeshifts into a member of Macbeth's household. The messenger who delivers the letter to Lady Macbeth is now the same character as one of the witches. This creates an unsettling sense of the witches invading Macbeth's life.

Act II, Scene 3

- The Porter's scene is usually comic relief, but its original references are hard for modern audiences to understand. We have kept the rhythm of the original but changed the examples:
 - A looter instead of a farmer.
 - A butcher (meaning murderer) instead of an equivocator.
 - A gangster instead of an English tailor.

These changes link the Porter's speech to ideas of war crimes and profiteering, making it relevant today.

- One of the witches appears in this scene to show they are creating chaos in Macbeth's life and to add a sense of evil foreboding.

Act II, Scene 4

- After Duncan's murder, the speech about nature being in turmoil is delivered by a character dressed as a priest, turning it into a vigil for Duncan.

Act III, Scene 1

- Ross, now serving Macbeth, brings in the two murderers who will kill Banquo.

Act III, Scenes 2 and 3

- In the original, the murder of Banquo and Macbeth's agreement are separate scenes. We have combined them to make the story faster and clearer. Macbeth's words are illustrated by the brutality of the murder.

SPECIFIC NOTES ON THIS PRODUCTION CONTINUED

Act IV, Scene 1

- The witches' excitement is emphasised by small text changes and repeated chanting of "Round about the cauldron go" and "Double, double, toil and trouble" to build tension.
- The witches themselves become the apparitions, rather than bringing on extra performers. They wield props that illicit the theme of childlessness and children as victims of war.
- After this, Macbeth speaks with Ross instead of Lennox. Ross's loyalty is uncertain.
- Lady Macbeth overhears Macbeth planning to kill Macduff, which affects her later actions.
- Ross confesses his doubts, showing his growing unease and fear for his safety. This text uses lines from Lennox and an unnamed Lord in the original. It shows Ross changing sides after witnessing Macbeth's behaviour since becoming King.

Act IV, Scene 2

- Ross's lines remain as written, but earlier changes show him as unsettled and afraid.
- After Lady Macduff speaks with her son, Lady Macbeth enters and delivers the messenger's lines. This makes her appear more sympathetic and shows her journey towards guilt and madness.

Act V, Scene 2

- Ross directly addresses the audience on the progress of the English forces.

The end of the play

- In the final scene, just before Macduff enters, the witch appears in the guise of Seyton and brings in Lady Macbeth's body. Macbeth's last battle is fought around her.



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DISCUSSION POINTS FOR GCSE ENGLISH CLASSES

When thinking about a piece of theatre – or any form of art – it is important to consider that almost everything you see or experience could be regarded as a “choice.” A useful question to ask about any piece of art might be: why did the artist choose to present it in that way?

For example, why has the writer chosen to include one moment of action but not another? Why has William Shakespeare chosen to show Macbeth on his way to kill Duncan and then show him afterwards, but not the murder itself?

Here is an example of what the discussion could include:

- Is it simply a practical decision? Showing a murder on stage might require special effects such as a trick knife and fake blood. Were things like this available in Elizabethan theatre?
- Would a scene change at this point interrupt the tension as scenery is moved? Would the effect be ruined if, after the murder, the pace slowed down?

- Is Shakespeare choosing instead to focus on what really matters – the moments when Macbeth could make a different decision, such as the scene before the murder when he considers another path? Or afterwards, when we immediately see the horror of the incident and how the murder has already affected him? Perhaps this is more interesting and dramatic than showing a sleeping man being killed?

These discussions can help students develop their understanding of the play. By expressing opinions on the piece, they will gain deeper insight, which will strengthen their written answers in GCSE English exams.



QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION AFTER SEEING THE PLAY

1. In what ways do you think this production was staged differently from its original performance in Elizabethan England?
2. Why has the creative team chosen to set this play in a modern setting with modern weaponry?
3. Alongside the modern setting, why has the creative team chosen to keep Shakespeare's original language?
4. This production includes Lady Macbeth in more scenes than the original text. What was the effect of this? What does it make you think about her role in the original play?
5. What does the increased presence of the witches in Macbeth's life make the audience think and feel?
6. Was there anything you saw in the play that you imagined differently when reading it in class?
7. If you were staging a production of *Macbeth*, what would it be like?

