

INTO THE VORTEX

FAUSTUS: How comes it then that thou art out of hell?
MEPHISTOPHELES: Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Heather Neill talks to the director **Lucy Bailey** about bringing *Macbeth* to the Globe.

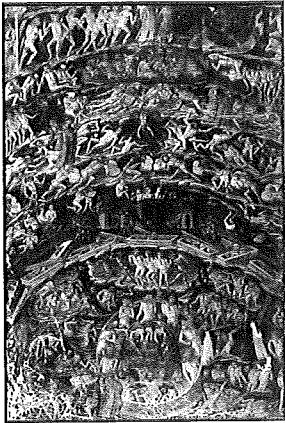
HN Your previous Globe productions in recent years, *Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens*, were remarkable for their distinctive, often violent, imagery. No doubt *Macbeth* also suggests a brutal world.

LB My first instinct on reading the play was to try to understand the mindset of Medieval Scotland. Holinshed, in his *Chronicles of Scotland* (Shakespeare's source for *Macbeth*), depicts a nightmarish brutal world, equivalent to a modern slasher film. Eleventh-century Scotland was a land

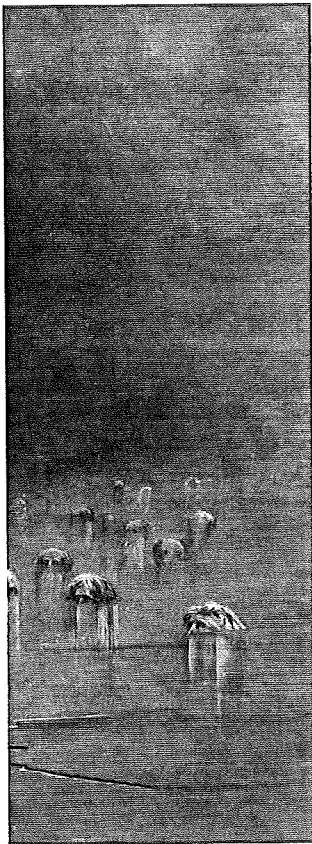
An endless descent into a circular Hell.

'So, wedged in ice to the point at which appear / The hues of shame, livid, and with their teeth / Chattering like storks, the dismal shades stood here.' Dante and Virgil on the frozen Lake of Cocytus. From Gustave Doré's illustrated edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, 1868.





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of shocking barbarity and tremendous turbulence, where Kings were violently overthrown every six or seven years.

HN Has the Globe itself, the shape of the building, influenced your approach?

LB Yes, very much so. I have set the whole thing in a medieval Hell, inspired by the circular architecture of the Globe. Standing in the yard and looking at the space, it occurred to me that the descending circles of the Globe echoed Dante's description of hell as a vortex, of nine descending levels. Dante describes the very bottom of Hell as the pit, which is the equivalent to the pit of the Globe in my mind – here he and Virgil walk across a frozen lake where the traitors, who are the most heinous of sinners, are stuck in ice, in permanent agony. There's a wonderful image of this by Gustave Doré, which has inspired both myself and designer Katrina Lindsay in our approach to the design of the piece. We are in both a literal Hell and a Hell of the mind. Macbeth is mentally in Hell from the moment he meets the witches at the top of the play.

HN Macbeth is both hero and villain. Why does he so appeal to modern audiences?

LB Macbeth is a surprisingly modern man in that he questions the very existence of God. He has immense arrogance, vanity, daring, and a huge ego. We all recognise that lust for power in our contemporary leaders, who have become despots and tyrants. The paradox is that despite Macbeth's pursuit of violence, we continue to identify with him. He risks all. He courts damnation. He sells his soul only to discover the banality of all existence. The extraordinary thing about Shakespeare's play is that it is akin to Beckett and other 20th-century dramatists who portray the deep absurdity and final meaninglessness of our little lives here on earth.

HN And yet murdering his king, who is also his guest and therefore deserving of protection, causes him terrible anguish.

LB It is absolutely the worst thing he can do – to kill a king. It's hard for us to understand today just how terrible that crime was considered to be. Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth I and James I put enormous energy into propagating the nature of Kingship as God-anointed. James I was particularly obsessed by his own holiness, and set about aligning Kingship to having powers of healing simply by touching the afflicted. It was a clever way of protecting himself from assassination – and it worked. Traitors suffered terrible torture and disgusting deaths. When Lady Macbeth asks Macbeth to kill the King it's a big ask!

HN The marriage of the Macbeths is one of the few successful ones in Shakespeare, at least to begin with. But it deteriorates fast, doesn't it?

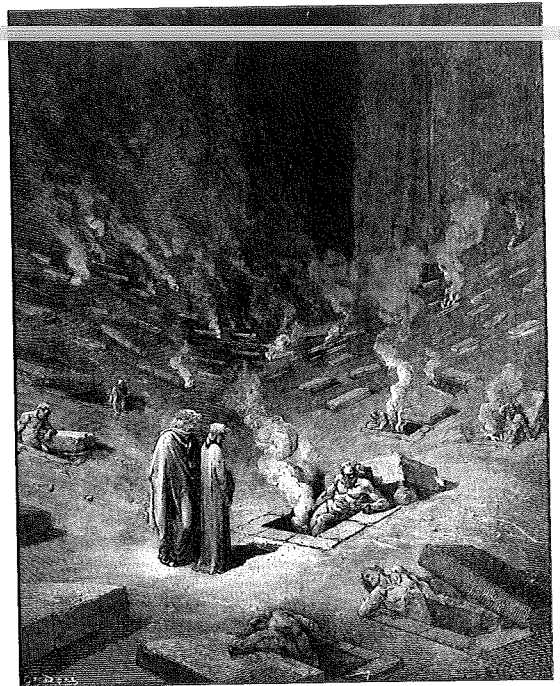
LB They are a golden couple, like the Kennedys. I've cast a very young Lady Macbeth. In my mind, she doesn't begin as a fiend-like queen; she's gorgeous, the sex bomb of Scotland! She is driven by greed and desire for power and instant elevation, like many young people today who crave instant fame, and bonkers amounts of money. The idea of wealth and power is for her intensely intoxicating. She's naive rather than heartless. She is playing with fire and has no real understanding of the consequences. Her frustration is that, as a woman, she can only achieve it through him.

HN Lady Macbeth has obviously had a child. Have your actors invented a back-story to explain the absence of children and perhaps their determination to win the crown?

LB We began by inventing elaborate back-stories, which became far too modern in their emphasis on grief and denial. I realised that it was all nonsense and very far from Shakespeare's actual portrayal. He doesn't see them as childless. There is so much contemporary criticism stressing the sterile nature of the marriage and how Lady Macbeth compensates for her childless state by pouring her energies into her husband's career. I can't see that in the play at all. At the start of the play, this amazing couple have everything – looks, adoration and position. They are madly in love, – they are not thinking about children – their priority is power and advancement. Once Macbeth makes his pact with Fate, it's part of the deal that he will have no children. Banquo's issue will become the future kings. From this moment onwards the Macbeths' marriage bed is sterile – they don't sleep, they don't have sex. The poisonous prophesy of the witches literally destroys all personal fulfilment, sexual and spiritual.

HN James I was, of course, very interested in witchcraft and wrote a treatise on the subject. How do you see the Witches?

LB They are the gatekeepers to Hell in my production and, in that sense, relate to the stewards, who are the gatekeepers of the Globe theatre. In rehearsal we spent time rooting the Weird Sisters as damaged, victimised women, products of a cruel superstitious society. They also inhabit the Hell that is the landscape of the play. They are literally in league with the devil – their task is to drag down as many other poor souls to eternal torment. They live in torment, so their



'The grave-slabs all were thrown back and upturned, / And from within came forth such fearful crying, 'Twas plain that here sad tortured spirits moaned.' Dante and Virgil in the City of Diss. From Gustave Doré's illustrated edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, 1868. Topfoto

satisfaction is to torture and corrupt others. They choose Macbeth as their next victim, as he is the juiciest challenge – the man at the top of fortune's wheel – ripe to pluck down. They also detect that he is one of their own.

HN Why do superstitions about 'the Scottish play' persist?

LB It's generally believed that because *Macbeth* was always staged in very dark conditions, many accidents happened. At least we won't have that problem at the Globe – fingers crossed!

Heather Neill is a freelance theatre writer.