

FOOTLIGHTS

The Newsletter for Barton Theatre Company
Issue 10: March 2012

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1. EDITORIAL

Hello and welcome to the March issue of Footlights.

A shorter issue than last months, as apart from the continuing saga of Macbeth, it's been pretty quiet during February.

This month we have an update on the progress of the Scottish play.

There's also an article, which I hope you'll enjoy, examining just why there are *three* witches. And (the part that pleases me) explains why Shakespeare got it wrong and my favourite author Sir Terry Pratchett got it right!

Not forgetting the usual quiz and reminders of what's going on when.

This newsletter has been sent out at the beginning of March. However, rest assured that usual (i.e. shambolic) service shall be resumed next month. This is because later this month I'm off on my hols and won't be getting back until April 1st. So if a newsletter is going to happen (it may not – this is *me*) it will be at least a week into the fourth month.

So read this one slowly.

Andrew Nevill (Editor
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2. MACBETH

Rehearsals for Macbeth are well under way.

Dave has blocked most of Act and II and is starting work on Act III. Elaine McCann has been working with small groups of actors on their individuals scenes

From what I've seen things are going well. Many of the cast are already partly off their books which is a tremendous boost as it's hard to act when you're holding your script in front of your face.

As a result, the actors have been coming out with some great stuff at rehearsals. And Dave isn't doing too terribly either.

The other day, we spent a whole rehearsal choreographing, you would have to call it, the opening of Act II Scene IV (the banquet scene) Dave's idea for it sounded, lets settle for, experimental. But what we ended up with, just in the rehearsal room, had the hairs on your neck standing on end. On stage, it ought to be jaw dropping.

Dave himself, as you can tell from his regular Macbeth emails, seems well satisfied with our progress.

The next significant thing will be the full run through from noon on April 1st at St Mike's

Before we finish, let's not forget that our production is part of something bigger – the RSC Open Stages.

Dave has confirmed that we will almost certainly be asked to perform an excerpt of Macbeth at the Contact Theatre - RSC's regional partner for Open Stages as part of a Shakespeare Festival a week after the production.

It's also quite likely that we'll also perform an excerpt at the Wilmslow Guild Drama Festival.

3. WHY THREE? WHY WYRD?

In Will Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, perhaps the most famous characters (possibly including the title character), are the witches. A trio of secret, black and midnight hags who forgather in a thunderstorm on a blasted heath, boil up unappetizing brews in a cauldron, and utter tricky prophecies which shape the destinies of kings. The stage directions are quite clear as to what they are ('Thunder and lightning; enter three witches'), and the text is equally clear as to their name. They are the Weird Sisters. That's what Macbeth calls them, and what they call themselves. The Weird Sisters.

Thing is Shakespeare got it wrong! It wasn't until over 350 years later that it was set right when the fantasy author Terry Pratchett wrote a parody of the Scottish Play. He called his version *Wyrd Sisters*.

That, actually, is how Shakespeare ought to have spelled the name of his own three witches, since it is their true and original title. It doesn't mean they were peculiar or crazy. It is the Anglo-Saxon wyrd, a word meaning Fate or Destiny, which is now completely forgotten in England, but is still sometimes heard in Scotland, in encouraging remarks

such as 'Weel, laddie, ye maun e'en dree your weird' (roughly, 'That's your bad luck, son, and you'll just have to put up with it').

Shakespeare's witches could foretell, and probably direct, your destiny.

Incidentally, this is an aspect that Dave has picked up in our version of Macbeth as he has the witches appearing throughout the play observing (or perhaps directing) events.

Shakespeare found their name in the book where he first read about Macbeth's career, Raphael Holinshed's History of Scotland (1577). Holinshed was too cautious to commit himself as to what exactly the three women on the heath can have been. He wrote:

The common opinion was, that these three women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophecie by their necromantical science, because euerie thing came to pass as they had spoken.

Goddesses, nymphs, fairies, witches, necromancers, prophets? Yon can take your

pick. But there is no doubt that they had power.

But why, in the play, are there precisely three of them? It is of course true that this suits the theatre as Pratchett's character, the playwright Hwel remarks when he looks through a script which we in the real world might find familiar.

There were, he had to admit, some nice touches. Three witches was good. Two wouldn't be enough, four would be too many. They could be meddling with the destinies of mankind and everything. Lots of smoke and green light. You could do a lot with three witches. It was surprising no one had thought of it before. [*Wyrd Sisters*]

But the true reason lies far, far deeper. Three has always been an important number in stories, and in magic.

In fairy tales, we find several groups of three. There are three little pigs, three bears, three wishes; the list goes on. In many stories there are three brothers who must undertake a quest. The first two brothers (eldest, overconfident and arrogant) fail miserably leaving the third brother (youngest, kind-hearted, humble) to successfully complete the quest, marry the princess and often as not rescue his useless siblings.

All good things come in threes, and all bad things too. Which is why the Ancient Greeks and Romans spoke of three Fates who held in their hands the thread of each person's life: Clotho spun it on her distaff, Lachesis measured it, and in due time the dreaded Atropos ('She who can't be turned aside') snipped it with the shears of death. They were usually said to be old women, looking much alike, except that the first two wore white robes and the third, guess who, black.

Norsemen too believed in goddesses of destiny, the Norns. According to one poem there were just three, whose names were Urdr,

Verctandi, and Skuld - meaning 'what's-happened-already', 'what's-happening-now', and 'what's-bound-to-happen'. But others said there were many of them, and that they came to every child when it was born, to shape its life.

In southern Europe people thought that there were supernatural women who bestowed wishes and gifts on newborn babies. They were a kind of fairy, but it was most unwise to use that word - better to refer tactfully to 'Ladies from outside', or 'Ladies who must not be named'. They were the original fairy godmothers. In Greece and the Balkans, they would arrive on the third night after the birth, and there were three of them. Everyone went to bed early that night, the dogs would be chained up, the door of the house left unlocked. The baby's cot would be placed near the icon in the main room, and beside it a table with three low stools for the Ladies. There would be a candle burning, and heaps of food - bread and wine, fruit, nuts, honey-cakes. Nobody could enter the room till morning, when the midwives and female relatives would eat up the goodies themselves, for the Ladies had already magically taken what they wanted of them during the night.

As well as stories and mythology, the number three also occurs in religion. Christians have the Holy Trinity, many Wiccans follow the threefold rule and Bhuddism has the Triple Gem or Three Jewels to name just three (Well, you don't think I'm going to break my theme do you?)

As we've seen, three certainly seems to be a significant number but it's not the only one. We have lucky seven, unlucky thirteen. For the Chinese, it's lucky number eight. Twelve is also a significant number. It was the Egyptians who gave us the 12 hour clock and the Romans the 12 month year (following the lunar cycle) and, if you believe in it, both our

zodiac (Babylonian in origin) and the Chinese zodiac have twelve signs. And by the way twelve is divisible by, yes you guessed it, three. (Am I reaching here? Who knows?)

But why three? Why is it so prevalent? The answer is we don't know.

My suggestion is that maybe it has something to do with all those stories. Humans have always told stories. Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen argue, mainly in *The Science of Discworld II: The Globe*, (a highly recommended read by the way as are all three volumes) that telling stories is what *makes* us human.

Stories are how we pass on knowledge, culture and our beliefs to those who will come after us. Each culture has its own stories designed to pass on that culture's values and worldview to the succeeding generation. It's why we tell stories to children. Stories are our Make-A-Human kit, or to be more specific our Make-A-Briton, Make-An-Aussie, Make-A-Masai kits.

Cohen and Stewart also talk about memes, which are something slightly different to the cute pictures of cats sweeping the Internet. They define it as:

An idea so attractive to human minds that they want to pass it on to others. The song 'Happy Birthday to You' is a highly successful meme. [*The Science of Discworld II: The Globe*].

So a successful meme is repeated over and over and of course replicated. When you sing Happy Birthday to someone, you end up teaching them the song and they in turn pass it on to others. Just like the best stories and, yes, those blasted – yet adorable - cats!

So the stories that we retell over and over again are memes and also contain memes within them. Going back to fairy tales, many of them are variations on a theme – or should that be meme?

One of these memes has just got to be the number three. An idea so attractive it's got everywhere. And why? Well, someone, somewhere, sometime had to have been the first person to use a trio. Maybe, just like Hwel, just like Shakespeare and just like everyone else who has told stories after them, that First Storyteller decided three sounded *good!*

Sources:

Terry Pratchett, Jacqueline Simpson, *The Folklore of Discworld*, (Doubleday, 2008)

[Which forms the basis for this article and from which I have quoted extensively]

Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart, Jack Cohen, *The Science of Discworld II: The Globe*, (Ebury Press, 2003)

Terry Pratchett, *Wyrd Sisters*, (Corgi 1989)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zodiac>

<http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/astronomy-and-time/time-facts/faqs/why-12-months-in-year>

http://www.shawministry.com/significance_of_three.



4. QUIZ

This quiz is a trio of questions about a trio from Greek Mythology. Answers as usual at the end

1. Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone, were collectively known as?
 - a) The Furies
 - b) The Muses
 - c) The Gorgons
2. What were they?
 - a) Prophetesses
 - b) Vengeance deities
 - c) Water nymphs
3. They appear prominently in a trilogy of plays called the *Oresteia* written by?
 - a) Aeschylus
 - b) Euripides
 - c) Virgil

5. DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Barton Theatre Company Dates:

Committee Meeting

21 March, 8pm, Elly's House

Macbeth

Rehearsals: Monday & Thursdays, 7.45pm, St Michael's Community Centre, Liverpool Road, Eccles

Run Through: Sunday 1 April, 12 Noon, St Michael's Community Centre, Liverpool Road, Eccles

Performance: 16-19 May 2012 Evenings (Thurs-Sat): 7:30pm Matinees (Sat, Sun) 2pm

Salford Arts Theatre

Kemsing Walk

off Liverpool Road

Salford

M5 4BS

Bookings: Phone: 0161 799 4685

0161 925 0111 (Theatre)

E-mail: boxoffice@salfordartstheatre.co.uk

<http://salfordartstheatre.co.uk>

Smiths Bite Size Theatre

The Opposite of Claustrophobic

By Rob Johnston

Thursday 22 March and Sunday 25 March

Thursday 22: Meals 6.00pm / 6.30pm

Performance at 8.15pm

Sunday 25: Meals 3.00pm / 3.30pm

Performance at 5.15pm

Meals and drinks at menu prices

£8.50 for theatre ticket

Early Evening Offer (2 courses) £13.95

Fixed Price Menu (3 Courses) £19.50

Chef's Specials available (dishes individually priced on boards in dining rooms)

On Sunday: Sunday Roasts at £9.95

Bookings: Smiths Restaurant

1-3 Church Road

Eccles

Manchester

M30 0DL

Tel: 0161 788 7343

<http://www.smithsrestaurant.net>

Salford Arts Theatre:

Romeo Don't Shoot Me

2-3 March 2012

Doors open 7pm / Performance starts at 8pm

Full £7 / Concession £5 (OAP, Students, Friends of the theatre & benefits)

AGE RESTRICTION 16+

Family Secrets

30-31 March 2012-03-03

Doors open 7pm / Performance starts at 7.30pm

ADVANCE tickets £10 Full / £8

Concession

ON THE DOOR £12 Full / £10

Concession

How To Relax In Andalucia

26-28 April 2012

Doors open 7pm / Performance starts at
7.30pm

Full £7 /Concession £6 (OAP, Students,
Friends of the theatre & benefits)

Salford Arts Theatre

Kemsing Walk

off Liverpool Road

Salford

M5 4BS

Bookings: Phone: 0161 925 0111

E-mail: boxoffice@salfordartstheatre.co.uk

<http://salfordartstheatre.co.uk>

6. THE FINAL CURTAIN

So that's your lot for this month. Sorry the newsletter was a bit on the thin side

You can help prevent the newsletter from becoming too thin (yes, ladies, there *is* such a thing) by sending me articles, anecdotes, quizzes or other contributions. If you do this it will make me happy! Rest assured you will be credited.

Footlights will be back next month.

Assuming I get back from Ireland in one (sober) piece

Quiz Answers:

1. a
2. b
3. a

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Barton Theatre Company Committee

Chair: Brian Cogswill, Treasurer: Elaine

Hayton, Secretary: Andrew Nevill

Officers: Joan Breen, Beverley

Greenhalgh, David Milne, Janet Johnston,
Val Ridings

Web: <http://www.bartontheatre.co.uk>

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