

*State* TheatreNJ.org  
Keynotes



A WYRD PRODUCTION

# MACHOMER

[www.machomer.com](http://www.machomer.com)

Welcome to the State Theatre’s school-day performance of *MacHomer*. Written and performed by Rick Miller, this is the classic and tragic story of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* told in the voices of the characters of television’s *The Simpsons*.

In these *Keynotes*, you’ll find information about the original play as well as *The Simpsons* television series. You’ll also learn how (and why) Miller merged Shakespeare’s tragedy with comic cartoon mayhem—and how he manages to play all the characters by himself!

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## State TheatreNJ.org Keynotes

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*The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.*

*MacHomer* is a comic vision of how Shakespeare's *Macbeth* might look through the eyes of the characters on *The Simpsons*. The show lasts about an hour. Don't expect to hear all the famous speeches from the play or get every detail of the story. If you don't already know *Macbeth*, you should spend some time reading the play or at least become familiar with the story and characters. You'll enjoy *MacHomer* a lot more if you know what they're making fun of!

"One dysfunctional family does another."

D'oh!



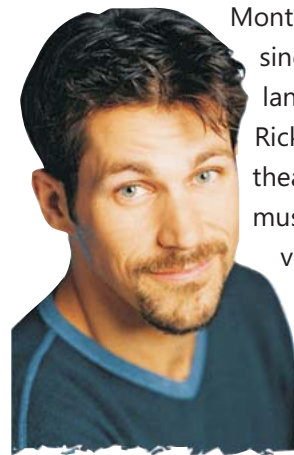
## How It All Started

In 1994, actor Rick Miller was playing Murderer #2 in a production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He had only six lines in the play, which left him with a lot of free time backstage. According to Miller, "I just thought, 'You know what? *The Simpsons* television show is becoming really popular and I have a voice that can take on a lot of different cartoon ranges.'" As a joke, he began to concoct a version of *Macbeth* where all the characters took on the voices and personalities of characters from *The Simpsons*.

Miller's five-minute "joke" was a huge hit with his friends. Word began to spread and eventually he was invited to develop his concept into an hour-long performance, which he called *MacHomer*. The show transforms Shakespeare's famous tragedy of ambition, murder, and witchcraft into something entirely different. Miller plays all the roles by himself, voicing over 50 characters from *The Simpsons*. The production also features songs, video projections, and sound effects. *MacHomer* was directed by Sean Lynch. Beth Kates designed the production and also serves as the show's production/stage manager. Over more than a decade, *MacHomer* has been enjoyed by more than half a million people around the world.

## Meet Rick Miller

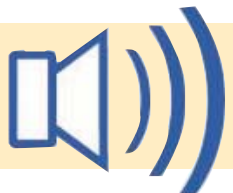
Canadian Rick Miller is an award-winning actor, comedian, and playwright. Trained in Montreal as an architect, actor, and singer, he has performed in five languages on five continents. Rick's credits range from classical theater to the avant-garde, from musicals to live comedy, from voice work to film and television.



In addition to *MacHomer*, Rick is the co-creator of the shows *Bigger Than Jesus*, *HARDELL*, and *Lipsynch*, all touring internationally. You may have

seen him on television as host of the ABC hit series *Just for Laughs*. Also on television, Rick's many voices can be heard in hit cartoons such as *Atomic Betty* (Sparky), *My Big Big Friend* (Bongo), and *Magi-Nation* (Orwin, Freep, Ashio).

Visit Rick's website: [www.rickmiller.ca](http://www.rickmiller.ca)



Listen to a [radio interview with Rick Miller](#) to hear how he created *MacHomer* and how he's able to do all the voices.

# Shakespeare's Macbeth

## Background

*Macbeth* is the story of a power-hungry Scottish nobleman and his equally ambitious wife. To gain the throne, they murder King Duncan and order the assassination of anyone who might pose a threat. The couple's ruthless grab for power is fueled by prophecies from three witches, who predict Macbeth's rise and also foretell the path of his downfall.

William Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* sometime during the first decade of the 17th century. As with his other plays, he based elements of the play on existing documents and material. Some of the characters in *Macbeth* are actual people from Scottish history, including Macbeth, Macduff, and Duncan. Shakespeare would have read about them in *Holinshed's Chronicles*, a history of the British Isles that he used as the source for some of his other plays besides *Macbeth*.

No doubt Shakespeare chose Scottish history as his subject to pay homage to the new King of England, James I, who was previously King James VI of Scotland. James believed that he was a direct descendant of Banquo, one of the historical characters in *Macbeth*. The real Banquo was said to have assisted in the murder of King Duncan and the crowning of the traitor Macbeth. Shakespeare was careful to leave out these unsavory details from the play!

Macbeth is Shakespeare's shortest play. Some think it's because King James had a short attention span.

## The Real Macbeth

There was a King of Scotland named Mac Bethad mac Findlaich, known in English as Macbeth. He was born in 1005, became King in 1040, and ruled until his death in 1057. He did indeed kill King Duncan, but it was in battle, not cold-blooded murder. Macbeth ascended to the throne and ruled Scotland for 14 years—far longer than he does in Shakespeare's play. He turned out to be a much better king than Duncan. Under Macbeth, Scotland became comparatively stable and prosperous. In 1054, he was challenged by the Earl of Northumbria, who declared that the rightful king of Scotland was Duncan's son, Malcolm. Malcolm killed Macbeth in battle and reclaimed his family's throne.

## Why Witches?

James I was notoriously afraid of witches and witchcraft. He considered himself an authority on the subject and published a book, *Daemonologie*, describing witches, their magic, and how to destroy them. While he was King of Scotland, he authorized the torture of many people suspected of practicing witchcraft. Dozens of condemned witches were burned at the stake in what would be the largest witch hunt in British history. Given the King's particular interest, it's not surprising that Shakespeare included those scary witches as a major element in *Macbeth*.



No contemporary image exists of the real Macbeth. This portrait is from the 19th century.

## The characters in *Macbeth*, listed in order of rank or importance:

### DUNCAN

King of Scotland. Murdered by Macbeth.

### MALCOLM

Duncan's son. He eventually joins Macduff to overthrow Macbeth and become the next king.

### DONALBAIN

Duncan's son and Malcolm's younger brother.

### MACBETH

At first, part of Duncan's army. He later becomes the Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and then King of Scotland. He murders Duncan and seizes the throne. To protect his kingship, he hires assassins to murder Banquo and Fleance. He is ultimately killed by Macduff.

### BANQUO

A general in Duncan's army and friend of Macbeth. A potential rival for the throne of Scotland, he is murdered by assassins hired by Macbeth. Banquo's ghost comes back to haunt Macbeth.

### MACDUFF

He allies himself with Duncan's son Malcolm to overthrow Macbeth. He wants to kill Macbeth in revenge for Macbeth having arranged the murder of Macduff's wife and children.

### FLEANCE

Banquo's son. He escapes the assassins sent by Macbeth to kill him and his father.

### SIWARD

Earl of Northumberland, general of the English army.

### YOUNG SIWARD

Siward's son. He is killed in battle by Macbeth.

### LENNOX, ROSS, MENTEITH, ANGUS, AND CAITHNESS

Scottish noblemen.

### SEYTON

An officer serving Macbeth.

### LADY MACBETH

Macbeth's wife. She persuades him to kill Duncan. Later, she feels so guilty that she goes insane and dies, most likely by suicide.

### LADY MACDUFF

Macduff's wife. She is killed by assassins hired by Macbeth.

### HECATE (pronounced HEH-kah-tee)

An evil spirit who keeps company with the three witches.

### THREE WITCHES

Witches who offer prophecies to Macbeth about his future.



## Getting Into Character

- ★ Take your cue from Rick Miller and create your own one-person show. Choose a character from *Macbeth*. Read carefully through the play for clues about the character's age, social position, actions, beliefs, relationship to the other characters, etc. Write a 3-5-minute monologue that tells part of the story from your character's perspective. Without revealing your character's identity, perform the scene for the rest of the class. Afterwards, give them two chances to identify your character. If they can't figure it out, have them ask your character some questions. Respond as the character (not as yourself).
- ★ Working with three or four classmates, stage a roundtable discussion: *Who is the rightful King of Scotland?* One person acts as the moderator and begins the debate. The other people in the group each take on the character of someone in the play and argue the question from their character's perspective.
- ★ Deception is a main theme in *Macbeth*. In Act I, scene 7, Macbeth says to Lady Macbeth, "False face must hide what the false heart doth know." Choose either Macbeth or Lady Macbeth and create two masks: one representing their real selves and one the face they present to the public.

# The Story

**Act I:** Three witches tell Macbeth that he is destined to achieve new honors: first becoming Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland. They further reveal that Banquo's sons—not Macbeth's—will rule Scotland in the future. Macbeth learns that he has been made Thane of Cawdor. He writes to his wife about the witches, including their prediction that he will one day be King. Lady Macbeth urges him to hasten his rise to the throne by killing King Duncan when he spends the night at their castle.

**Act II:** At his castle, Macbeth has a frightening vision of a bloody dagger. He begins to regret his plan to murder the King, but Lady Macbeth will not let him back out. Macbeth murders the sleeping King and plants the bloody dagger on the drunken guards. Duncan's body is discovered. Macbeth kills the guards to prevent them from talking. Duncan's sons flee to England, leaving the throne of Scotland to Macbeth.

**Act III:** Upset by the prophecy that Banquo's sons will inherit the throne, Macbeth orders the murder of Banquo and his son Fleance. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. Macbeth receives the news during a banquet. As his guests look on in amazement, he sees the ghost of Banquo at the table.

**Act IV:** Macbeth visits the witches to learn more about his future. They tell him to beware Macduff, a nobleman loyal to King Duncan who has now fled to England. Then they tell Macbeth that no man born of a woman can harm him and

that he will be safe until Birnam Wood (a nearby forest) comes to Macbeth at Dunsinane Castle. To be safe, Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's wife and children. Upon hearing the news, Macduff joins forces with Malcolm to take back the throne from Macbeth.

**Act V:** Macduff and Malcolm advance with their army on Dunsinane Castle. Macbeth is confident that the witches' prophecies mean that he is safe. Lady Macbeth is haunted by visions of Duncan's murder as she walks in her sleep. News is soon brought to Macbeth that his wife has killed herself. Next comes word that the English army is advancing on Dunsinane Castle, camouflaged with branches cut from Birnam Wood. Macduff and Macbeth draw swords. In the heat of the fight, Macduff reveals that he was not "born of a woman," but "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb. Macbeth realizes that the witches' prophecies have come to pass. He fights on until he is killed by Macduff. Duncan's son Malcolm assumes his place as King of Scotland.



Above: "Macbeth and Banquo Meeting the Witches on the Heath" (1819) by Théodore Chassériau

## Nobody's Perfect.

Shakespeare's plays are grouped into three categories:

TRAGEDY      COMEDY      HISTORY

Along with works including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, *Macbeth* falls into the category of tragedy. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) defined tragedy as a drama that shows a series of events that lead to a tragic ending. The central character (protagonist) is an admirable person, except for a "fatal flaw" (such as pride or jealousy). The events and circumstances in the story, combined with the protagonist's flaw, lead to his tragic downfall. The final outcome is designed to provide the audience with a *catharsis*—a release of strong emotions.

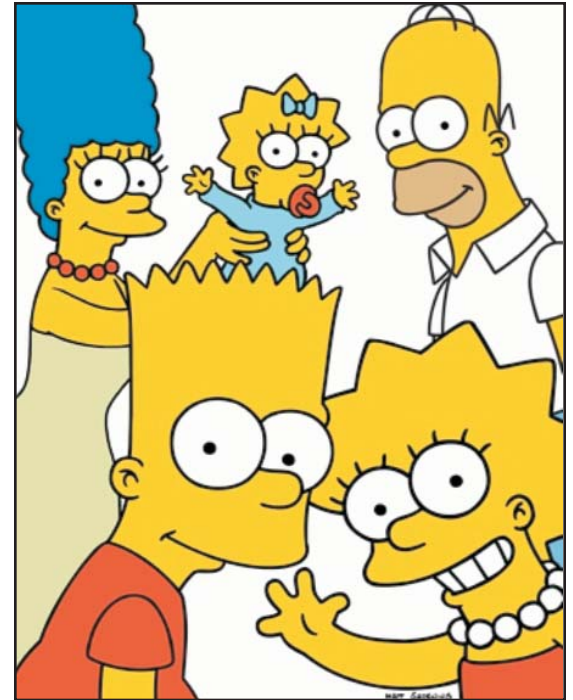
- ★ What do you think is Macbeth's fatal flaw? What circumstances and events in the play make this weakness fatal for him?
- ★ Does Homer Simpson have a fatal flaw? What do you think it is?
- ★ Think of a play or movie you've seen that has a tragic ending. How did you feel at the end? Why do you think people like stories that have an unhappy ending—that may even leave them in tears?



# Meet the Simpsons

*The Simpsons* is the longest-running comedy in television history. January 14, 2010 will mark the 20th anniversary of the animated series. The show was created by Matt Groening (who also created *Futurama*) and was originally a series of short sketches that appeared on *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Two featured members of the *Tracey Ullman* cast, Dan Castellaneta and Julie Kavner, became famous as the voices of Homer and Marge Simpson and other characters. With over 400 episodes and a feature film, *The Simpsons* has earned 24 Prime Time Emmy® Awards and the Simpson family has earned its own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

*The Simpsons* follows the lives of Homer and Marge Simpson, their children—Bart, Lisa, and Maggie—and the other residents of the fictional town of Springfield. Through the cartoon characters, the show makes fun of American society, human behavior, big business, and other subjects. In addition to the regular cast of characters, many guest celebrities (among them Stephen Hawking, U2, Lance Armstrong, and LeBron James) have played themselves on the show. Other guests (among them Ricky Gervais, Liam Neeson, Jack Black, and Michael Jackson) have lent their voices to some of the show's fictional characters.



## Who's Who in MacHomer

In *MacHomer*, Rick Miller re-creates the voices of over 50 *Simpsons* characters. Of course, Homer and Marge play Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. From the list below, can you guess which character in *Macbeth* is played by each of these other *Simpsons* characters?

Ned Flanders	Lisa Simpson	Smithers
Principal Skinner	Moe	Otto Mann
Krusty the Clown	Captain McCallister	Apu
Bart Simpson	Mr. Burns	Troy McClure
Barney Gumble	Moe Szyslak	Grampa Simpson



## To Do/Discuss

- ★ Why do you think *The Simpsons* has become America's longest-running primetime TV entertainment program? What are some of the qualities that make the show so popular with audiences of all generations? If you watch it yourself, what do you like most about it?
- ★ Think of another TV show that could be used to create a parallel version of *Macbeth*. What specific elements in the show are similar to *Macbeth*? Try writing a scene from *Macbeth* for your TV characters.
- ★ Rick Miller has said that *The Simpsons* "holds up a satirical mirror to modern-day society." What is the definition of satire? What is its purpose? Is it effective? Why?
- ★ Think of examples of satire in *The Simpsons* and *MacHomer*. Who or what were they satirizing? Create a list of other examples of satire (TV shows, magazines, Internet sites, novels, movies, poems, etc.) What people, events, or ideas are most often the target of satire?

With *MacHomer*, Rick Miller continues the long tradition of one-person shows. From the ancient bards chanting heroic poetry to today's standup comedians, the solo performance has always enjoyed great popularity. In the world of the theater, there are many different types of one-person shows. There are plays, such as *I Am My Own Wife*, written for a single actor. Some solo performances portray a famous personality: for example, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, or Harry Truman. Actors such as Whoopi Goldberg, Lily Tomlin, John Leguizamo, and Anna Deavere Smith have created shows where they bring to life a broad range of mostly fictional characters who speak directly to the audience.

*MacHomer* belongs to a category of theater where the performer or ensemble offers a condensed version of a popular play, television show, etc. The Reduced Shakespeare Company's *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* presents all of the plays of Shakespeare in a little more than 90 minutes. Charles Ross has created shows that compress the entire *Star Wars* trilogy and *The Lord of the Rings* into about an hour.

*MacHomer* shows off Rick Miller's special talent for impersonation. Part of the excitement comes from seeing how quickly he's able to switch his voice from one character to another, playing about 50 *Simpsons* personalities in all. His performance is enhanced by recorded sound effects and sophisticated lighting and projections. The projections add visual humor and also help the audience members who aren't familiar with *The Simpsons* to identify the various characters.



*MacHomer* uses projections, lighting, and sound effects to heighten the theatrical experience.



## To Do/Discuss

- ★ Were you surprised to see which *Simpsons* character played each of the roles in *Macbeth*? Do you agree with Rick Miller's choices? If you could make any changes in the roles, what would they be? Why?
- ★ During the performance, look for the ways Rick Miller uses body, facial expression—and of course, voice—to switch from one character to another.
- ★ If you had to play several different characters, how would you make sure the audience understood the difference between the characters? Pair up with a classmate and choose a story you both know well. Take turns telling the

story as a one-person show and make sure to make each character different. How will you make it clear to your partner when someone new appears in the story?

- ★ As you watch the performance, notice when the *Simpsons* characters step out of their *Macbeth* roles to speak and behave as themselves. Does this make it easier or harder for you to understand the story and characters in *Macbeth*?
- ★ After the show, write a review of the performance. Be sure to discuss all of the key elements: the script, acting, costume, lighting and projection, sound, etc.

# “Something Wicked this Way Comes” 9

At the beginning of *MacHomer*, the witches speak these well-known lines:

FIRST WITCH: Where the place?

SECOND WITCH: Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH: There to meet with **Macbeth**.

Horrified, one of the performers steps out of character and exclaims, “Oh God! Don’t say that! It’s bad luck!” This is a reference to the play’s reputation among theater people for being cursed. No one knows when or why this idea got started. One theory is that the three witches in the original production were actual witches casting real spells. Over time, belief in the curse was reinforced by a series of accidents—even deaths—that were connected in some way to the play.

According to the superstition, it’s bad luck to utter the word “Macbeth,” especially inside a theater. So you’ll often hear someone refer to *Macbeth* as “the Scottish play” rather than using the actual title. There are all kinds of practices and rituals that are supposed to ward off evil spirits if someone accidentally speaks the name of the play. These include reciting an appropriate line from one of Shakespeare’s other plays, spitting over your left shoulder, or twirling three times.



“The Three Witches” (c. 1793) by Henry Fuseli



In an episode of *The Simpsons*, Sir Ian McKellen (who has played Macbeth numerous times) is struck by lightning after saying the play’s name.

At the very first performance, Shakespeare himself had to play Lady Macbeth when the actor meant to play her suddenly died.

In Amsterdam in 1672, the actor playing Macbeth brought a real dagger onstage and killed the actor playing Duncan—right in front of the audience!

In New York City in 1849, there were two productions of *Macbeth* featuring rival actors. During a performance a riot broke out among partisans of each actor; 31 people were trampled to death.

On April 9, 1865, Abraham Lincoln read aloud to his friends the lines following Duncan’s murder. Lincoln himself was assassinated a week later.

Lilian Baylis, artistic director at the Old Vic in London, died of a heart attack the night before the opening of her 1937 production.

During the run of a 1942 production, Duncan and two of the witches died and the set designer committed suicide.

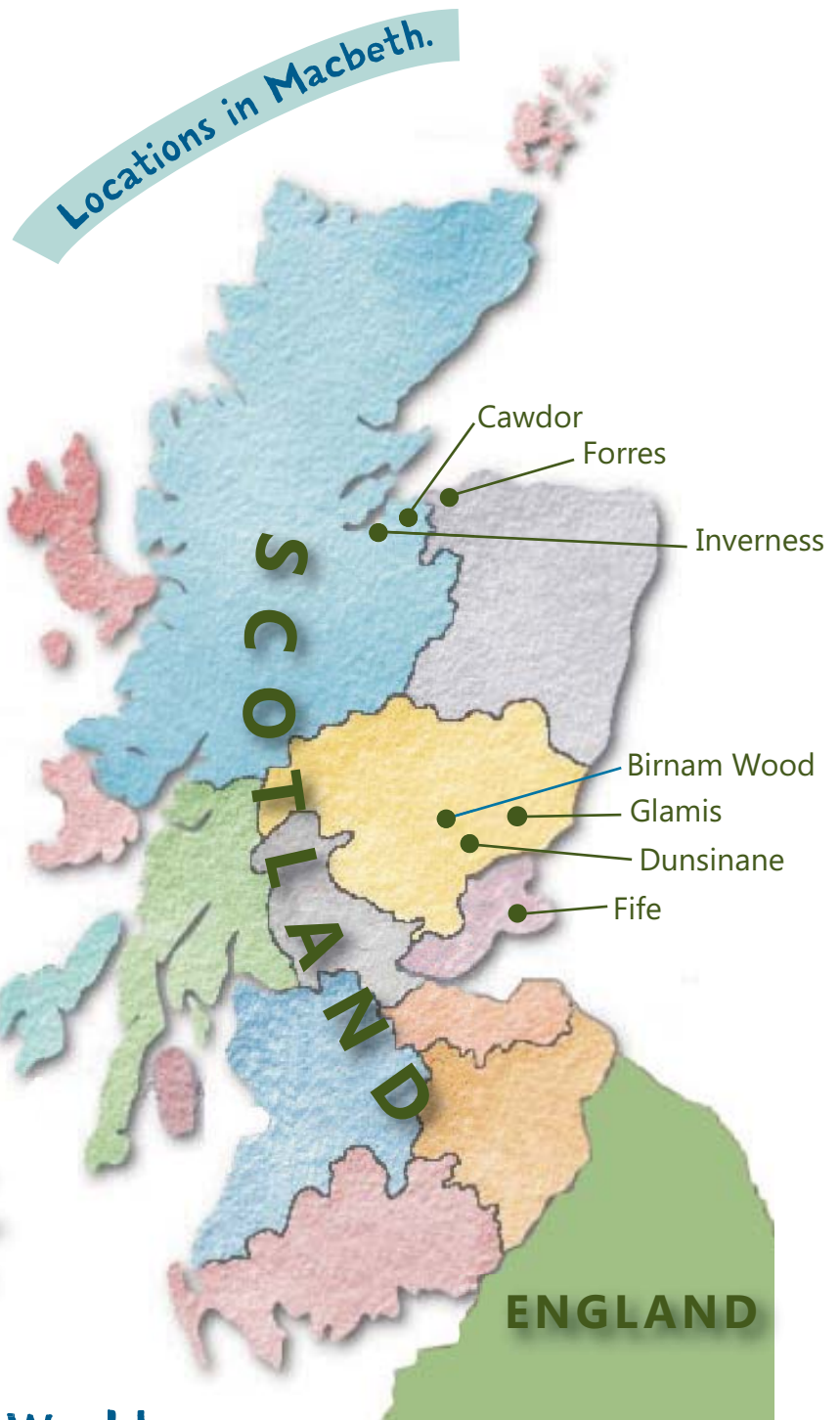


# Macbeth's Scotland

The historical Macbeth lived in Scotland about a thousand years ago, during a time of great political and territorial upheaval. Under the political structure of the period, the High King of Scotland ruled over seven provinces, each made up of a group of extended families called clans or tribes. Each of these provinces had its own king—a warlord whose status depended on his skill in battle. Beneath the kings were five social ranks: mormaer, thane, freeman, serf, and slave.

The High King of Scotland was selected alternately from different royal families. This system created great instability, as tribal chiefs regularly killed off the king and seized the throne for themselves. Fighting over power and territory was ongoing. In particular, there was a great rivalry between Moray (Macbeth's tribe) and Atholl (Duncan's tribe).

When we first meet Macbeth in the play, he is called thane, an official who collects dues and tribute to support the King and his court. The real-life Macbeth held the rank of mormaer, a powerful member of the royal kin group from which kings were chosen.



*There is no such language as Scottish. Macbeth would have spoken Gaelic, a language in the same family as Irish.*

## Who's Who in Macbeth's World

Besides fighting among each other, the Scottish engaged in ongoing conflicts with some of these other groups:

**The Vikings** - In addition to Norway, Iceland, and large parts of Ireland, the Vikings conquered parts of Scotland's northern mainland, Orkney Islands, and Western Isles.

**The Danes** - King Canute of Denmark ruled over Norway and England from 1016 to 1035.

**The Angles** - Descendants of a Germanic tribe, the Angles lived in northern England under the rule of the Danes.

**The Irish** - The Irish shared a common language with the Scots as well as cultural and marriage ties.

**The Church** - Though the head of the church in Scotland officially answered to Rome, the monks and priests working among the people came from the Celtic tradition. They continued many of its practices, such as clergy taking wives.

- ★ A life map is a visual representation of the events in a person's life. It may include text, pictures, and/or objects. Working in pairs have one person create a life map of a principal character from *Macbeth* and the other person do the same for the equivalent character in *MacHomer*. Share your life maps with the rest of the class and compare and contrast your two characters.
- ★ How much influence does Lady Macbeth have over her husband? Do Marge and Homer Simpson have a similar relationship, or is it very different? How does this comparison affect your interpretation of *MacHomer*?
- ★ Taking Rick Miller's concept, create a comic strip to tell the story of one act of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. You can use *The Simpsons*, another cartoon, or make up your own characters. Make sure to include text, images, and as much detail as you can.
- ★ You'll notice during the show that Homer has a tough time getting all the way through Macbeth's most famous speeches. How does he end up performing them? Take one of these soliloquies and perform it all the way through—in the character of Homer.
- ★ Some of the main themes in *Macbeth* include:

Ambition	Truth vs. Deception
Guilt	Fate vs. Free Will

Choose one of these themes and write a brief essay discussing whether it applies to *The Simpsons*. Explain your position with specific examples from the show.
- ★ Akira Kurosawa's 1957 film, *Throne of Blood*, takes the story of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and turns it into a samurai drama set in feudal Japan. Watch Kurosawa's film and also one of the more traditional film versions. (See resources list on page 12.) Then make a chart comparing the characters, themes, stories, visual elements, and impact on the audience of *Macbeth*, *MacHomer*, and *Throne of Blood*. Which version did you enjoy the most? Why? Which one told the best story?
- ★ Divide your class into two teams and debate the following question: Would Shakespeare have approved of *MacHomer*? Look for evidence to support your side by reading about his life and times and looking for clues in his plays, sonnets, and other writings.



Is this a dagger which I see before me...  
or a **PIZZA?**

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has inspired at least 50 films, plus operas, ballets, orchestral music, paintings, and sculptures.



Zounds!  
What have they  
done to my play?!

## Learn Your Part

One essential collaborator needed to create a live performance is the audience. The weeks and months of thought and preparation that go into a show are directed toward creating a performance that will inspire and entertain you and the other people who are watching and listening. Your role in this artistic collaboration is very important. Make sure you know your part:

- When you arrive at the theater, follow an usher to your seat.
- Before the show begins, make sure to turn off and put away all electronic devices, including cell phones, portable games and music, cameras, and recording equipment. Keep them off for the entire performance.
- Once the house lights (the lights in the part of the theater where the audience is sitting) go down, focus all your attention on the stage. Watch and listen carefully to the performance.
- Attending a play in the theater is not the same as watching television at home. At the theater, talking, eating, and moving around disturbs the performers and other members of the audience. And please—no texting or checking messages during the show!
- If something in the show is meant to be funny, go ahead and laugh. And of course—feel free to applaud at the end of the performance if you liked what you saw.
- After the performers are finished taking their bows, stay in your seat until your group gets the signal to leave the theater.



Turn it off.



No Photos.



Quiet, Please.

## Resources

### Books

*Macbeth* (No Fear Shakespeare Graphic Novels), illustrated by Ken Hoshine. SparkNotes, 2008.  
*Macbeth* adapted into a graphic novel, with lots of helpful materials.

*A Charmed Life: Growing Up in Macbeth's Castle*, by Liza Campbell. Thomas Dunne Books, 2007.  
The autobiography of the last child born at Macbeth's castle.

*Shakespeare 101*, by Michael LoMonico. Gramercy, 2004.

*101 Things You Didn't Know About Shakespeare*, by Janet Ware and Al Davis. Adams Media, 2005.

### Online

<http://www.machomer.com> - The official MacHomer website

<http://www.folger.edu/documents/Full%20Macbeth%20Study%20Guide.pdf> - Folger Shakespeare Library's excellent study guide for *Macbeth*

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/default.htm> - Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet has lots of information, links, and resources.

[www.pbs.org/shakespeare](http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare) - The website for this 2004 PBS series has inventive explorations of Shakespeare's life and times, resources, games, and more.

### Films

*Macbeth* (1948). Directed by Orson Welles, starring Welles and Jeanette Nolan. Not Rated.

*A Performance of Macbeth* (1979). Directed by Philip Casson, starring Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. Not Rated.

*Throne of Blood* (1957). Directed by Akira Kurosawa, the film transposes the story of *Macbeth* to feudal Japan. Not Rated.

*The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1971). Directed by Roman Polanski, starring Jon Finch and Francesca Annis. Rated R.