

A ONE ACT PLAY (40 minutes)

PRELUDE TO MACBETH

by

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a one act play

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PRELUDE TO MACBETH – A ONE ACT PLAY

Introduction

This one act play is a prequel to Shakespeare's Macbeth. The story of how Macbeth becomes Thane of Glamis and how he meets Lorna Stewart who becomes his wife - Lady Macbeth. The play is written in blank verse - the style fashionable with playwrights of Shakespeare's era.

A simple stage set is suggested - for example free standing flats (1m wide x 2m high) in an arc across the playing area - painted a neutral colour such as grey. Entrances and exits can be between the flats or in front of them. The flats suggest rocks like Stonehenge or castle battlements.

Side lighting is recommended using floor spots with mauve or blue gels to give a more sculptured effect to the players and add atmosphere. The theatre stage lights operate at two levels:- full-on for daylight scenes; low for night scenes. Lighting cues and levels are indicated at the appropriate places in the script.

The atmosphere of the play is enhanced by sound effects (indicated as FX in the script). And it is suggested that some sections of the Spirits' dialogue is pre-recorded with added reverb and other sound effects - to enhance the actors' stage presence.

Characters

A MONK	Appears in the opening scene – can be the actor who plays Callum - with monk's robes worn over his costume.
MACBETH	Duncan's army chief of staff. An excellent soldier – but battle weary and out of his depth at a social level.
DUNCAN	The King of Scotland – cunning and manipulative.
3 SPIRITS	Commonly called The Witches in Shakespeare's play – but called Spirits in this play so that male actors can take one or more of these parts. Their individual characters differ. Spirit 1 is nasty. Spirit 2 is caring. Spirit 3 is the peacemaker.

LORNA Lorna has been living on her wits since her parents' death – sleeping with various Thanes. Ambitious and angry with tons of sexual charm and aggression.

CALLUM A guard at Forres Castle – Duncan's seat of power. Callum is the wise fool.

Synopsis

Macbeth's first wife has just died. Battle weary and devastated by his loss he decides to give up being a soldier. Duncan doesn't want to lose Macbeth. He offers him the title of Thane of Glamis if he will agree to continue as his general. Macbeth knows he will either have to accept the offer - or flee into exile. Duncan won't take no for an answer.

Lorna abandons her new born baby on the Heath. The baby was the result of a relationship Lorna had with a Thane. The baby is found by the three Spirits who take it to a woman who has recently lost her child.

Macbeth arrives at the Castle of Forres – Duncan's seat of power. He meets Callum guarding the gate.

Lorna is destitute. She is wandering across the Heath when she stumbles on the Spirits. They tell her she will one day be Queen. Lorna then meets Callum. He outwits her when she spins him a yarn about where she has come from. Making up a story about a highway robbery. Lorna then turns her sexual charms on Callum - seeing him as a way into the Palace and a stepping stone to get close to Duncan - to whom she is convinced she will marry and thus become Queen.

Several weeks pass. Macbeth is a virtual prisoner at Forres – while he stalls for time – not wishing to commit himself to being Thane of Glamis. Through her own cunning Lorna has grown close to Duncan. But Duncan's spies have seen through her façade and Duncan knows exactly who she is. Duncan then instructs her to seduce Macbeth and become his mistress then his wife – and persuade him to take the title Thane of Glamis. Lorna meets the Spirits again who explain she will be Queen through Macbeth not Duncan. So this encourages Lorna to do Duncan's bidding.

The play ends with Lorna and Macbeth in each other's arms - and Lorna persuading Macbeth to become the Thane of Glamis.

A Brief Note on the Blank Verse

The blank verse in this play isn't as pure as that achieved by Elizabethan writers. Shakespeare didn't always conform to the strict convention of the day. In this play though we do have consistency with each line having ten syllables. (Note that the Spirits speak in rhyme rather than blank verse)

Punctuation has been deliberately omitted - this to allow the director to use his/her discretion when it comes to meaningful pauses and the running on of lines, etc.

A Brief Note on Pronunciation

It's not intended that non-Scottish actors attempt to perform the play with Scottish accents. However note the pronunciation of the words below.

Forres - *Forrez*

Glamis - *Glaams* (a long A as in 2nd A in alarm)

McLeod - *McCloud*

In the script the one mention of the place where Scottish Kings are crowned is written phonetically as *Scoon*.

BLACK OUT and (if applicable) MAIN TABS CLOSED

On stage -

Macbeth *kneeling at the grave of his wife (his first wife).*

Duncan *standing to one side of Macbeth*

Monk *standing - holding a tall cross*

The 3 Spirits *- concealed on the floor - upstage - in a heap*

1 . FX

GREGORIAN CHANT WITH ADDED DRUM BEAT

MAIN TABS OPEN (if applicable) Q - START OF GREG CHANT

SIDE LIGHTS - BRING UP SLOWLY

THEATRE LIGHTS - FADE IN TO LOW

Q - COUNT FIVE SECONDS FROM BACK LIGHTS FULL ON

FX - FADE TO ZERO - Q DUNCAN TO START SPEAKING

DUNCAN Macbeth - a man of steadfast might

 Should shed no tears upon the sight of death

MACBETH (*Aside*)

 Here lies the wife I loved - with all my heart

 She was finer than the ocean's finest pearl

 But now a precious jewel that I have lost

Deep beneath rough moorland's windswept grass

DUNCAN What's done is done and cannot be undone

Look to your future - who's waiting in your past

Not one hundred - not ten - not one - but none.

Not her - not now - she's gone - buried most deep

She awaits you in heaven - not on this earth

Macbeth stands up and turns to face Duncan

MACBETH (Defiant)

My wife is dead - you disregard my grief

Grief that eats away at my aching soul

Now it's time to stand aside my lord

Take off the mail - discard the sword and pike

Your majesty - find another general

To lead the army - I'm done with it now

DUNCAN (*Angry*)

This is your King - enthroned by God's command

We will decide when you cast off your rank

MACBETH (*Defiant*)

I've pain enough to make me disobey

Turn my back on Scotland - to England flee

There in peaceful exile live out my life

DUNCAN *(Aside)*

Relationships come not lacking conflict

On the one hand he is to be admired

His leadership I can't afford to lose

On the other hand his firm stubbornness

I could do without - I am the King

But to let him go admits defeat - so

With him another tack we shall employ

The wolf did not become the loyal dog

By a stick beaten hard across its back

(To Macbeth)

For many years you've served us well Macbeth

For this we shall bestow a just reward

Glamis castle is yours - and the title Thane

MACBETH *(Aside)*

What would I give to be the Thane of Glamis

Of Scotland's finest castle I'd be lord
There's land to farm - and forest trees to fell
And burn in the hearths of its lofty halls
But Duncan's game I see - with this castle
Comes life long servitude to his command

They move away from the "grave"

MACBETH *(To Duncan)*

And what of the present Thane - my Lord?

DUNCAN Don't underestimate your King Macbeth

We have many ways – and here's just one

Staff bribed - bear witness against their master

Disgraced he will soon renounce the title

Thane of Glamis - so it comes to you Macbeth

Come by the Palace at morning time

Then I will hear your acceptance of this

And the Castle of Glamis is yours my Thane

That then - to all the world - I shall proclaim

EXIT - MONK

EXIT – DUNCAN

2. FX

THUNDER RUMBLES - FADE RAPIDLY TO BARELY PERCEPTIBLE VOLUME

AS MACBETH STARTS TO SPEAK_

MACBETH *(Aside)*

This dark and sympathetic night accords

Full well with my sorrowful saddened soul

If I took the easy path into exile

Oh Scotland how I'd miss your heathered hills

And sparkling streams - it is a bonny place

Aye - but sometimes not - for on nights like this

What stirs far out there on dark moorland heath

Blasted - burned by thunder's violent bolts

Fellows like I - with our piteous prayers

Cry to God - tether your wrath out there

EXIT - MACBETH LEFT

2. FX (CONTINUES)

ENTER - LORNA DOWNSTAGE RIGHT

Lorna is carrying her new born baby in a blanket.

LORNA *(Aside)*

This bastard babe has not the wit to know

That he's alive - so upon this heath death

Will mean no more to him than drawing breath

Lorna puts the baby down on the ground next to the "heap". She turns her back to the baby and walks away.

LORNA (Aside)

I am myself again - that millstone gone

The weight of which I bore more heavy than

Any love for that inconvenient child

The stuff of which I'm made will not allow

Haunting of my conscience - that's for the weak

EXIT - LORNA LEFT THRO GAP BETWEEN SCREENS

3. FX

SINISTER LOW PITCHED NOISE - CONTINUE UNTIL SPIRITS SPEAK

Spirit 2 reaches out for the baby - and pulls it to her chest. The Spirits uncoil themselves from the ground and get to their feet during the dialogue

SPIRIT 2 A child! A child! The babe I've always craved

SPIRIT 1 Wring his little neck

He was left with us to die

Squeeze until his face turns blue

And he no longer cries

SPIRIT 2 No - he's mine - my little babe in arms

SPIRIT 1 Ha! How will you feed him

Your breasts like bones are dry

Drier than Sahara sand

Beneath the noonday sky

Spirit 3 steps in between Spirit 1 and 2 - holding them apart

SPIRIT 3 Spirits - listen to my wisdom

A compromise we'll do

You'll not kill him cousin

And the babe's not left with you

4. FX

SCREECH OF AN OWL

SPIRIT 3 Hark - the tawny owl has come

He has a tale to tell

About a woman in Dunblane

To whom misfortune fell

She's lost her new born babe

He was but two days old

But we dark Spirits can put things right

And end her sorry woes

Spirit 2 and Spirit 1 square up to each other. Spirit 3 steps between them.

SPIRIT 3 Agreed?

No response from the other two Spirits

SPIRIT 3 (Louder)

Agreed?

SPRITS 1 & 2 Aye - agreed.

5. FX

PRE-RECORDED SECTION OF DIALOGUE – PLUS CLOCK STRIKING 12

SPIRIT ALL *(IN UNISON WITH RECORDING)*

O'r moor and mountain - river - lake

To Dunblane before he wakes

At midnight at this woman's door

This babe in blanket on the floor

Then depart with one swift knock

Before the twelfth chime of the clock

EXIT - THE THREE SPIRITS *(with the baby)* RIGHT THRO SCREENS

THEATRE LIGHTS - FADE TO BLACK OUT Q - EXIT SPIRITS

SIDE LIGHTS TO BLACK OUT

ENTER - CALLUM LEFT

6. FX

COCK CROWS

THEATRE LIGHTS - FADE IN TO FULL Q - COCK CROWS

CALLUM *(Aside)*

That cock I'd have gutted, stuffed and served up

Weren't he so old and scrawny - almost bald

He's been crowing these past ten years they say

Every passing hour marking exactly

But only the fool believes they crow on time

Fools gain their fake wisdom from old wives tales

While the wise fool agrees with nodding head

Lest he be picked on and made a victim

So which be Duncan our master - wise fool

Or plain foolish - he can be both I'll wager

And surely something more sinister too

But it's not for me to speak of or opinion state

ENTER - MACBETH LEFT

Macbeth approaches Callum. Callum stands to attention

MACBETH Stand easy soldier

Callum remains rigidly to attention

MACBETH (*Irritated*)

I thought my voice loud enough - my order clear

Has the noise of war your hearing impaired?

CALLUM Sir - I can hear the sea - the waves lapping

On the rocky shore some two miles distant

As clearly as when I hold a seashell

To my ear - my hearing's in good repair

MACBETH Then why not obey my command

CALLUM You were once my leader - but that time's past

From the army I've taken leave my lord

MACBETH And now reduced to lowly Palace Guard

Is this fitting reward for military service?

No glory - no excitement - just here - and nothing

CALLUM My reward sir - is my life well unscathed

Here sir - I enjoy looking at the sky

Without it being the last thing I see

Dying on the battlefield on my back

MACBETH *(Aside)*

This common man knows more his mind than I

For I can't decide between the mantle

Of Thane of Glamis or flight into exile

I fear the comfort of Glamis's lofty halls

Will be a few short windswept winter's weeks

While all the pleasant summer months are lost

MACBETH On the battlefield at Duncan's behest

Would exile be worse or better than this

Would Duncan come after me to England

Seek me out to take revenge by my death

He is dangerous - his temper fragile

As the rutting stag beating off its rivals

(To Callum)

What is your name soldier?

CALLUM Callum - sir Callum Mcleod

MACBETH Open the gates McLeod - Duncan's waiting

(Aside)

He will have my presence - not my answer

I must find ways to stall for precious time

And allow for a plan of good design

EXIT - MACBETH and CALLUM RIGHT - BETWEEN SCREENS

THEATRE LIGHTS - FADE TO LOW

Q - MACBETH AND CALLUM EXIT

SIDE LIGHTS - BRING UP

7. FX MOANING WIND - REDUCE TO ZERO - THIRD LINE

ENTER - LORNA LEFT

LORNA *(Aside - bitter and angry)*

Can a life get lower than where I am?

Nothing but these thin wasted clothes have I

All hope is gone now with the moaning wind

Taken by the thieves who snatch the daylight

Of ambition - leaving the dark dark night

Abandoned to never ending sorrow

8. FX

LOW FREQUENCY RUMBLE - FADE WHEN LORNA SPEAKS

ENTER – SPIRITS (RIGHT) TO STAGE LEFT OF EACH SCREEN

Lorna is startled by the appearance of the three Spirits. They advance a little towards her - boxing her in.

LORNA What hideous apparitions are these

 Clear the road vile creatures - block not my way

9. FX

PRE-RECORDED DIALOGUE

SPIRIT ALL (IN UNISON WITH RECORDING)

All hail Lorna Stewart

Queen to be of this fair land

All hail, all hail, all hail

SOUND DESK - STEP TO 11.FX (there is no No 10)

LORNA *(Lashes out at the Spirits)*

 You speak of nothing but senseless nonsense

 You foul and awful hags

The Spirits close in on Lorna

SPIRIT 1 Lorna had a little child

 A baby boy meek and mild

Which Thane or Lord did baptise

His seed of life between her thighs

LORNA Leave me be - your lies torture my head

SPIRIT 1 We know everything about you Lorna Stewart

Your past and your future

LORNA I know my past well enough - every inch

Of it I lived - for I was there you fools

SPIRIT 1 We shall enjoy recalling it - Lorna

SPIRIT 2 And your future is important

SPIRIT 3 You will enjoy hearing about that

LORNA I care less than a fig for your opinion

Speak what you like - I will ignore it all

SPIRIT 1 When you had hardly grown

Into a woman all alone

In this world abandoned by

Mother Father who had died

SPIRIT 3 You became the rich man's whore

Demanded gold and more

SPIRIT 1 and more

SPIRIT 2 You lived a life of comfort too
 And little trouble bothered you

SPIRIT 3 Your fall from grace was swift and sure

SPIRIT 1 When Thanes and Lords grew tired of you

SPIRIT 2 And adding to your state of gloom

SPIRIT 3 A bastard babe grew in your womb

SPIRIT 1 The jealous lady of the Thane
 Threw you out into the rain

SPRT ALL Now you're at your lowest ebb
 Cold and hungry almost dead

LORNA All that is just bitter confirmation
 Of a life that from hence will be denied

SPIRIT 2 That is what you must do - draw a line

SPIRIT 3 Yes draw a line - a line under everything
 That's gone before

SPIRIT 1 Deny all your past

SPIRIT 2 Invent for yourself a new identity

LORNA And where will that get me - to my future
 As what - Scotland's Queen - you speak rank nonsense

SPIRIT 3 The Crown's within your reach Lorna Stewart

You must heed the signs - you must heed the signs

11. FX

PRE-RECORDED DIALOGUE - WITH TAIL END OF LOW FREQ RUMBLE

SPIRIT ALL (*Chanting as they go - in unison with recording*)

All hail Lorna Stewart

Queen to be of this fair land

All hail, all hail, all hail

EXIT - THE SPIRITS SAME WAY THEY ENTERED

LORNA (*Calling out after the Spirits*)

What signs do I heed - return and explain

I have a need to know - from the gutter

How it is possible to touch Scotland's crown

SIDE LIGHTS - FADE TO BLACK

THEATRE LIGHTS - FADE IN TO FULL Q - LAST LINE ABOVE

12. FX BIRD SONG

LORNA (*Aside*)

Duncan the King grows old without a wife

Who's long since dead having borne him sons

He needs not heirs - but like all men could be

Persuaded that he needs to share his bed

If first I was to become his mistress

That is a step on the way to his wife

Scotland's Queen - that's true - but said so easily

Duncan is the King and therefore no fool

To underestimate him is unwise

But yet nothing have I to lose - and so

Shot high's my arrow of ambition

The bow in steady hand - I'll be his match