

# Rituals, robes, and hungry ghosts

*Stories of backstage  
superstition and lore*

By Katherine Shirek  
*Doughtie*



*Two editions of the Gypsy Robe.*

**T**HEATRE IS THE perfect breeding ground for superstitious ritual: so much can go wrong that when anything works right it seems like a form of divine intervention. A theatrical production is as close to controlled chaos as anyone truly wants to get. There are so many variables—rigging, lighting, pyrotechnics, and other effects—that can be fatally dangerous if not implemented correctly. There is the precarious alchemy among the script, the director, the actors, and the musicians. Finally, add the most important and least predictable element—the audience itself—and you have a recipe for either sublime transcendence or utter disaster.

Theatre itself depends on magic. Styrofoam masquerades as the skyscrapers of New York, brightly colored lights evoke the savannas of Africa. Actors transform themselves into larger-than-

life figures, channeling grand passions and living out extraordinary dramas. Collectively we are practitioners of illusion, striving to make the audience fall under our spell for a few hours while we weave magic into their lives. No surprise, then, that the practice of theatre includes its own versions of witchcraft, in the form of intricate backstage rituals.

Actors through the centuries have developed a multitude of ways to ensure a good opening or a long run, or to simply avoid disaster. Katharine Hepburn crosses herself when she passes the Martin Beck Theatre, where she flopped more than fifty years ago. Some actors refuse to unpack their makeup boxes until after the first reviews appear. One initiation ceremony for young actors involves urinating in their dressing room sinks for good luck.

Some traditions are very personal, others universal. Some actors believe that stage shoes must be kept on the floor, rather than on a table or in a cupboard. (This seems counterintuitive in theatres that have rats, who enjoy the taste of patent leather, but the superstition persists.) Signs of bad luck include encountering a funeral on the way to the theatre, passing another actor on the stairs, and speaking the last line of the play (or the “tag” line) during rehearsal.

Using the phrase “break a leg” to wish someone good luck is a commonplace backstage superstition. By wishing grave misfortune on someone, the theory goes, you trick the gods into believing you don’t need good luck and thus avert their malicious and capricious interference. There are variations on this theme, such as “fall down backward,” or “skin off your nose.” This latter is a reference to

the times when stage makeup was so noxious that it frequently pulled the skin off in patches when repeatedly applied and removed. The underlying hope is that the actor will have enough work to develop a splotchy complexion.

A good luck tradition on Broadway is the passing on of the Gypsy Robe from one troupe of hoofers to the chorus of singers and dancers at the opening of the next musical. Covered with an elaborate array of souvenirs and talismans from previous shows, it is bestowed ceremoniously to a member of the chorus on opening day by the previous owner of the robe. The new owner, wearing the robe, circles the stage three times counterclockwise and everyone touches the robe for luck. The honored recipient keeps the robe until the next Broadway musical opens. A new memento is added, including cast signatures and other details, and the tradition is then repeated.

Individual performers have taken even the smallest rituals to an extreme. Nineteenth-century actor Josephine Gallmeyer was always late arriving to her dressing room because she believed punctuality brings bad luck. German soprano Therese Tietjens would not shake hands with someone over a threshold at parting; she believed if she did, that person would die a speedy death. In an extremely curious ritual, the nineteenth-century French actor Virginie Déjazet would make her entrance with a tiny seed in her mouth, which she would throw away as soon as she needed to open her lips. And stories are told of a Viennese tragedienne who always performed with a white mouse hidden in her bosom.

By contrast, backstage crew superstitions seem rather reasonable. Whistling on stage is considered very bad luck, but it makes some sense when you know its history. In Elizabethan times the riggers were often sailors who didn't speak English and so the cues were given by whistles. Thus you might *think* you're whistling "Greensleeves," but to a stagehand it could mean "Drop the fire curtain right now!"

By far the most potent backstage superstition revolves around Shakespeare's "Scottish Play." This play reputedly originally contained authentic witchcraft incantations and has had a history of evil luck. S. L. Wellen, director of theatre at Mt. San Antonio College, explains that the play was written for King James I, who held a passionate belief in the occult. It is rumored that the king himself may have even supplied some of the original spells.

To say the name of this play or speak any of its lines onstage is considered the ultimate in bad luck. Some people will never utter it in any conversation; Kenneth Branagh always refers to it as the Scottish Play, as though he has never heard its real name.

The ill fortune befalling productions of this play or people who have slipped and said the "M-word" onstage is extensive. Lights blow out, injuries occur; accidents seem more prevalent than usual. Of course, there may be rational reasons for some of this: the Scottish Play is often performed with dim lighting and employs a great deal of onstage combat, including the use of broadswords in the more authentic productions. In addition, this work is Shakespeare's shortest: the Scottish Play is often added to a schedule at the last minute and can perhaps end up being dangerously under-rehearsed.

Whatever the reason, the play seems to trail bad luck like dust follows a stampede. The Astor Place Riot of 1849 took place during a performance of the Scottish Play. The script was said to be one of Abraham Lincoln's favorites; he supposedly reread it the night before his assassination. In 1937, a stage weight crashed into a backstage chair at the Old Vic, barely missing Laurence Olivier, who had just vacated it. During that same run, the opening was postponed because the director and the actor playing Lady MacDuff were in a traffic accident. And Lilian Baylis, the theatre's grande dame, died on the day of the first rehearsal. (Years later, on opening night of another production of the play, Baylis's portrait fell off the lobby wall.)

In 1935, Orson Welles produced an all-black version of the Scottish Play at

the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. Instead of witchcraft, they explored the themes of voodoo, and to that end brought in an authentic witch doctor as part of the cast. All agreed the play was a spectacular success, except for one reviewer, Percy Hammond of the *Herald Tribune*, who called it "an exhibition of deluxe boondoggling." The negative review came to the attention of the cast, and a group of players, including the witch doctor, visited one of producers of the show. When they asked the producer for verification that this critic was an "enemy" and a "bad man," the producer confirmed that the piece was not a favorable thing. Hammond came down with a sudden illness the next day and died shortly thereafter.

With all these deaths going on, it's not surprising that theatres have plenty of their own ghost stories, too. Ghost lights are always kept burning onstage overnight when the theatre is dark, allegedly to keep the ghosts at bay. (I always assumed it was to keep from making new ones as unsuspecting nocturnal wanderers might fall into an open orchestra pit.)

Many theatres have stories of their own supernatural supernumeraries. Clyde Parker, the technical director of Gammage Auditorium (the exquisite Frank Lloyd Wright theatre in Tempe, Arizona) tells of three gremlins that keep him and his crew company. One periodically drops sheared-off nuts and broken bolts down from the grid. (Careful inspection shows all the hardware intact.) Another one leaves "fresh globs of grease and goo" on the stage, the origins unknown and especially perplexing when the orchestra shell is covering the entire area. Then there's the Phantom Door Closer. This one operates late at night, usually when there is only one person in the theatre. The sound of the latch releasing alerts the lone stagehand, who can usually look around in time to see the door swinging silently shut.

Dennis Potter, the technical director at the KiMo Theatre in Albuquerque for the last fourteen years, has had plenty of time to learn his ghost's quirks and preferences. In August 1951, three boys

were at the KiMo watching a Western matinee. One of them went downstairs and was caught on the stairwell when the concession stand water boiler exploded underneath him. He died at the hospital.

The KiMo's ghost, if indeed it is this poor child, is usually a benign entity, playing practical jokes occasionally and only requiring a steady stream of doughnuts to keep it happy. The stagehands comply, adding the last doughnut from every coffee-break box to strings that they hang in loops on the backstage walls. The arrangement seems to work harmoniously for everyone.

Except for once. An Equity troupe came in for a two-week run of *A Christmas Carol*. The upstage wall, brick, was visible and worked well with the brick motif of the scenery itself. At dress rehearsal, however, the director noticed the string of doughnuts tied to the electrical conduit on the theatre's wall and ordered it removed.

Big mistake. A half-hour before the opening matinee, someone realized that the children in the show hadn't checked

in. Frantic phone calls revealed that, oblivious to the opening, they had all gone to see that after-noon's matinee of *Star Wars*. Emissaries were dispatched to go into the local movie house and roust the kids out of their seats. They were duly returned to the KiMo and the matinee started thirty minutes late.

But that was only the beginning. During the show everything that could go wrong did. Lighting instruments exploded, cables fell from the grid. People were tripping, forgetting their lines (even though they had just come from a long run in Santa Fe). Onstage doors opened and closed without cause. It was a disaster of the first order.

During the break between the matinee and the evening show, someone ran out and purchased two dozen doughnuts and the crew festooned the place with them, putting them everywhere they could. Not too surprisingly, the evening show went off without a hitch.

Whether you are a believer or not, these rituals certainly illustrate the complexity and magic of the world backstage. Some people undoubtedly hope

to avert the evil eye of fate. Others probably concoct these elaborate systems to calm their nerves or otherwise fill uncomfortable spaces of time. Perhaps, noticing a long series of coincidences, we hedge our bets and use superstitions with both agendas in mind.

No matter what role they play (for us or our supernatural counterparts), backstage superstitions will no doubt evolve and continue to amuse, enhance, and even protect us as long as theatre is in existence.

*Katherine Shirek Doughtie has been technical director for Opera A La Carte, a touring Gilbert and Sullivan opera company, for the past seventeen years. She lives in South Pasadena, California.*

*More backstage stories of the natural and supernatural can be found in Theatrical Anecdotes by Peter Hay (Oxford University Press, 1987). For a detailed examination of the legends surrounding M\*\*  
\*\*\*\*, see "Superstition and the Scottish Play" by Patrick M. Finelli in Akropolis, February 1996.*