**stage@leeds information sheet**

**Superstitions in Theatres.**

Theatres have been around for a long time. During this time many superstitions have developed, some of which we know why and others are still a mystery. Here are just a few, some with explanations and some without. The first is probably the most well known especially after a certain blackadder sketch. (Blackadder the third, Sense & Senility, BBC 1987)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h--HR7PWfp0>

**Macbeth:**Never say this; always call it “**The Scottish Play**”. It is said to bring very bad luck. Some say that Shakespeare himself brought a curse on it, by using real incantations in the three witch’s scene. Rumours are that on the first performance, the actor who was to play Lady Macbeth died suddenly and Shakespeare himself had to take on the role. Another actor was killed in front of an audience when a prop dagger was mysteriously replaced with a real one. When theatre companies were going bankrupt, it was the go to play to make money. This didn’t always work, which also adds to the bad luck scenario!

Macbeth can be mentioned outside the theatre and after the show. Obviously, you can mention Macbeth on the stage during the play. Never before the show or back stage should you mention him. There are some get outs, should you accidently mention the M word. These vary from region to region. Some of these include spitting, cursing, spinning around three times whilst outside the theatre and then asking to be let back in. Usually the ritual involves combinations of these. Hence the scene in Blackadder!

**Whistling:**This is also considered bad luck. However, this has a little more substance to it. Before cue lights and Cans (headset communications), cue’s were signalled by the stage manager whistling. Because of all the ropes, in the past, most stage crew (especially the guys doing the flying) were sailors, who used different whistles to signal different things. So if you whistled, they might have dropped a cloth or piece of set onto you. Definitely bad luck!!

**Break A Leg:** This is used to say “good luck” before a show. Good luck, ironically, is considered to be unlucky! Should someone do that then the cast should get together and wish each other bad luck or curse to avert disaster.

The phrase “break a leg” is thought to mean one of two things; the opening and closing of the curtains (breaking the leg line i.e. the wing masking) or when you bow you bend your leg making it appear broken. The more either of these happens, the more popular the show was.

**Left Foot:** The left foot is supposed to be luckier than the right; therefore the actor should always leave the dressing room and enter left foot first.

**Dark:**The term the “theatre is dark” should always be used instead of the “theatre is closed” should be used, as it is said that to say that its “closed” would let the plague into the theatre.

**Props:**Props that should not be used on stage are mirrors, real money and jewellery. The mirror could get broken giving both you and the theatre seven years bad luck. The mirror could also distract an actor whilst they look at themselves vainly in the mirror. The main reason is that it makes lighting the show more awkward. (Light bounce). Real money and jewellery are also said to be bad luck. This is probably more to do with the risk of theft and/ or the fact that actors in the past couldn’t afford such things.

**Peacock feathers:** This is said to be the evil eye and that chaos will follow if taken on stage. It is based on the Greek myth of Argus. This is the story of a giant whose body was covered with one hundred eyes. After he was slain, his eyes were preserved forever in a peacock’s tail.

**Blue:** Wearing the colour blue on stage is also said to be bad luck. Although, this can be remedied by wearing silver. Blue has always been an expensive colour and in the past difficult to achieve. It is believed that the rumour was started to cover up the fact that a lot of companies were close to bankruptcy. Although some wore blue to pretend that they were more successful than they actually were.

**Scripts:** Some actors believe that if you put your script under your pillow it will help you learn your lines quicker.

**Ghosts:** Almost all theatres have their own ghost stories. There is one ghost that is said to inhabit all theatres. His name is Thespis and back in 6BC he was allegedly the first person to speak lines as an individual. (Hence Thespians). You should always keep one night a week free for him to do his acting. (Usually Sunday or Monday).

**Ghost Light:** You should also leave a light on, although today we have emergency lights. Some say that this is to keep ghosts away; others believe it is so Thespis can see what he is doing. Back in the days of Gas lighting, it was prudent to leave a light on to stop the build up of pressure in the system. (This could be where the tradition really came from).

**Dress Rehearsal:**Actors Believe that a bad dress run, means that the show will be a good one.

**Candles:** There is a superstition about three lit candles on stage. The person, who finds themselves closest to the shortest one, will be the next to marry, or die!!

**Flowers:** Flowers should never be given before a performance as this will cause the show to close before its finish date. Superstition also calls for flowers from a graveyard to be given to the director or lead actress on the last night. (Death of the show).

**End of Show:** Never say the last line of a show before it opens and never take a bow to an empty auditorium, or bad luck will follow.

There are a few others to add to the list. There are probably many more as theatre has existed in some form or other in many cultures.

* Do not wear new makeup on an opening night.
* Never knit in the wings.
* Do not paint the “Green Room”, green.
* Never open a show on Friday.
* Do not place shoes or hats on dressing room furniture.

The above information was created using the following on line sites:-

* Chickenshed Theatre.
* Whats on stage (London).
* Curtain Call.
* Wikipedia.
* History. Co.uk