

# Very Superstitious

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In the words of Everyman's artistic director, Vincent Lancisi: "The Theatre is filled with creative imaginations that are always willing to suspend their disbeliefs. It's no wonder that theatre folks are a suspicious lot. The theatre is a place where illusion can seem like reality to the point where one is haunted by what they experience on the stage. Superstitions are dramatic!"

Superstitions are not only dramatic; they are also fascinating when you try to trace their origins. Some go back to the time of early Greek drama and others are as recent as the 20th century. But most of them are still adhered to today.

Over the centuries the protective ritual of superstition has given the actors a way of preserving theatre tradition in addition to helping them cope with unaccountable happenings in their illusion-laden profession. Some superstitions are based on wish-thinking; others on practicality.

The following are a few examples along with their possible origins:

## The Scottish Play

The gods of vengeance will release their wrath if the name 'Macbeth' is mentioned in the theatre; except when the play itself is being performed. "The Scottish play" is the safest way of referring to it. In *The Dresser*, when "Sir" in his confusion says, "My name's Macbeth!," poor Norman tries to ward off the curse. According to the rules, one must leave the theater building, spit and curse and spin around three times, before begging to be allowed back inside. Of course, Sir cannot do that.

There are two theories behind the superstitious behaviors actors take around this play. The first contends that Shakespeare, who dared to write about witchcraft, murder, and ghosts all in one play brought a curse upon it because he used the actual words of a real spell when the three witches say, "Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble".

Another theory claims that all forms of bad luck have plagued this play more than many others. Accidents galore, illnesses and sudden deaths seem to head the list. But the one thing that is cited as a given, is that the extraordinary number of fight scenes in the play and poor stage lighting must have taken its toll on the actors over the years.

## Break a leg

This popular expression is a way of wishing an actor 'good luck' before a performance by saying the opposite. This was believed to keep the fates from putting an 'evil eye' on the performer. Break a leg appeared in print in *The Charleston Gazette* in 1948 and it seems there is evidence from personal recollections that it may have been around since the 1930s, but no earlier. One thing is certain: 20th century theatres around the world have taken it for their own. According to *World Wide Words*, the German version, "Hals-und Beinbruch," (translating to "neck and leg break") means the same as the American version (with the addition of the neck, for extra measure). But what follows is curious. It's been said that the "German expression is actually a corruption of a Hebrew blessing "hatzlakha u-brakha," meaning "success and blessing," which

may have been borrowed via Yiddish. Whatever its source, the most plausible theory is that Hals- und Beinbruch was transferred into the American theatre (in which Yiddish- or German-speaking immigrant Jews were strongly represented) sometime after World War I.”

### **Bad dress rehearsal....good show!**

Many actors believe a bad dress rehearsal will equal a good opening night for the show. The dress rehearsal brings the cast face to face with the fact that the next performance will be the real thing. The redeeming feature is that there is still time for cast and crew to fix things in time for a good show. The search for the origin seems to be in favor of its practical reality.

### **Whistling in the theatre**

To avoid bad luck, actors must not whistle on or off stage. This tradition is based on the old-time practice of hiring stage hands who used coded whistles to communicate scene changes to each other (there were no walkie-talkies or computers). If a whistle came from an unknown source, it could cause major chaos.

### **The Ghost Light**

There must always be a light burning in the theatre. Theatres would not be theatres if there were no ghosts around to haunt them. The superstition says that the “ghost light” wards off a stray ghost or two that might be wandering around after everyone else has left. Another ghost story claims that there must be a “dark night” (a night off) so that the ghosts have time to put on their own performance.

### **A Black Cat**

Contrary to ordinary superstition, a black cat is good luck in the theatre. But it’s a bad omen if it should run across the stage during a performance. Evil will also follow if anybody kicks the cat. Almost all references to black cats have to do with witchery. As far back as ancient Egypt, cats were supposed to have magical powers; so of course, that was seen as good for the theatre. But when word spread that cats had the soul of a vampire, that was bad. It seems like a no-win situation!