



ACADEMIC INNOVATION

Students Find New Depth in *Macbeth* Through Early Staging Techniques

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In November, Worcester State student actors explored *Macbeth* through a new, yet historic lens by drawing on staging techniques that would have been familiar to audiences in the 17th century.

One of William Shakespeare's most well-known tragedies, *Macbeth* follows a Scottish general whose ambition drives him to murder the king and seize the crown. As Macbeth's power grows, so do the personal and political consequences that ultimately lead to his downfall. The WSU production, performed four times over four days, gave students the opportunity to learn how early modern actors approached the play and how those methods can shape performance today.

Directed by theatre professor Kim Carrell, the production introduced students to the historical and cultural context in which *Macbeth* was written. Carrell began rehearsals by helping the cast understand the political concerns of the early 1600s, including the transition to the reign of King James I.

"King James VI of Scotland, a Catholic, had just been crowned King James I of England," said Carrell. "The persecution of Protestants during the reign of England's Catholic Queen Mary was well within living memory. What kind of king would James be? Would he be a tyrant? Shakespeare wanted to address these ideas in *Macbeth*."

With this foundation, students turned their attention to the staging practices of the period. Instead of relying on a "fourth wall," students practiced a more open style of performance that emphasized direct audience engagement and visibility from multiple angles. They drew from early modern actors' use of eye contact, vocal energy, and physical presence to engage spectators directly. Finally, the set designers added a small forestage extension, allowing actors to step closer to the audience and recreate aspects of the intimate relationship found in early modern theatres.

"The staging caused a large shift in how I would generally approach a character," said junior John McAuliffe, who played Macbeth. "In the play, Macbeth speaks to the audience quite frequently, confiding in them his secrets and his feelings. Involving an extension to the front of the stage allowed me to get incredibly close to them."

This proximity, McAuliffe said, helped him tap into a new level of vulnerability during the "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" speech, one of the play's most emotionally demanding moments, which he performed with a quiet intensity that carried through the final performance.

By balancing historical methods with their own contemporary training and experimenting with movement, pacing, and direct communication with the audience, students gained a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's language and intentions. The production not only introduced them to early modern theatrical traditions but also strengthened their skills as performers, collaborators, and interpreters of classic texts while challenging them to think differently about storytelling and presence onstage.