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and
Improved!**

MMMMBETH

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Allison Williams



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Mmmbeth is a hilarious, gender-bending take on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Background

An earlier version of *MmmBeth* was presented at the Arkansas State Thespian Festival in Jonesboro, Arkansas, February 22, 2002, by Thespian Troupe 42, El Dorado High School.

Playwright Bio

Allison Williams trained in mask and movement theatre and playwriting, and holds an MFA from Western Michigan University. She spent 15 years as the Artistic Director of the circus company Aerial Angels, and has led the creation of *FALLEN* (Bible women + circus), *SLEEPWALKERS* (Grand Guignol + circus), and *STAND UP 8* (reality circus). Allison still coaches in the school residency program Starfish Circus, which trains 2000 K–12 students every year in circus arts and 21st-century skills. Her plays include a musical of *THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME* (Jenny Wiley Music Theatre, KY), *THE TALE OF TSURU* (adapted from the Japanese, Western Michigan University and the University of South Florida), and commedia dell'arte scripts. Her short play, *MISS KENTUCKY*, was a Heideman award finalist, and *HAMLETTE* won a Mark Twain Humor Award. Her radio trilogy, *DEAD MEN DON'T CARRY HANDBAGS*, *DEAD MEN DON'T JAYWALK*, and *DEAD MEN DON'T CATCH BOUQUETS* aired on National Public Radio. Her solo show, *TRUE STORY*, won Best of Show at the London Fringe and is a popular source for female monologues. Allison's most recent play is *THE NEXT HORSEMAN*, a comedy for Zoom (Coriander Press).

Synopsis

Mmmbeth is a fun, physical but dark comedy with some pretty serious source material. Everything goes wrong in this parody of Shakespeare's famous Scottish play, where it is a known fact that you never say the play's name on stage or you might get trampled by a hoard of marathon runners. The witches take over the storytelling, Queen Duncan would rather open a donut franchise than die, Lady M's a bloodthirsty June Cleaver,

and the murderers are preoccupied with creating a commercial for their services. Will Mmbeth ever become king? And what will he do to get what he wants?

Characters

MMMBETH: Easily frustrated Thane of Cawdor.

LADY MMMBETH: A gentle housewife... at first.

BANQUO: Mmbeth's best friend. Thinks something's rotten in the State of Scotland.

MACDUFF: Knows something's rotten in the State of Scotland.

QUEEN DUNCAN: Brilliant, misunderstood, and refuses to die or leave the play.

DAPHNE: The smart witch.

DORIS: The sly witch.

TWIT: The dumb witch.

HECATE: Big Mama Hecate, head of the witches and a blues queen.

TWO MURDERERS: Eager to help dispose of inconvenient obstacles to the throne, like heirs and suspicious thanes.

SON OF MACDUFF: Played by MACDUFF.

DOCTOR: Played by DAPHNE.

GENTLEWOMEN: Played by DORIS and TWIT.

TWO SOLDIERS: Behind the door when the brains were passed out.

MARATHON RUNNERS: Played by the cast.

Themes

Ambition, power, corruption, personal responsibility, relationships, greed, morality, betrayal

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Have you heard of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*? What do you know of the story?
- ★ Do you like Shakespeare? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you think there's a way to make Shakespeare's language easier to understand?
- ★ Do you consider yourself ambitious? Why or why not?
- ★ Is ambition a good thing? Why or why not?
- ★ Would you ever want to run the school? Why or why not?
- ★ What is your definition of power? What do you think it would be like to have power?
- ★ Are there areas in your life where you have power? Are there areas in your life where you're powerless?
- ★ Would you ever consider breaking the law to get what you want?
- ★ Reflect and respond to the statement "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." What do you think it means?

Pre-Read Activities

Status Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss the difference between high status and low status. What do high-status people have that low-status people do not? Do you consider yourself high status or low status? Do you think high-status people are more ambitious than low-status people? Do they have more power?
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau series that demonstrates three examples of high-status and low-status characters. Each picture should have fully-visualized characters, and a clear relationship between the high status and the low status in the picture.

- » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals? How can you use these principles to demonstrate status?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Discuss the similarities and differences between the groups. How did they choose to visualize status?

Ambition Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene about a character who wants, more than anything, to become student council president. In fact, in the scene they have found out information that could discredit their competition. They must decide whether to use the information or stick with legal means of winning.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. How did the groups present the concept of ambition? Did any of the groups decide not to use the information?

Ambition Reflection

- ★ Students will reflect on their relationship with ambition and write a paragraph. Do they see themselves as ambitious? Why or why not? Is ambition a positive or negative trait? What is the connection between ambition and power?

Power Tableau Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss what it means to try to get power. What does it mean to have power? Would you do something illegal to get power? What is power to students?
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau series that explores a story in which:
 - » They do not have power.
 - » They do something to get power.

- » There is a consequence of achieving power. Does getting power hurt someone else? Does getting power change them?
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Discuss the similarities and differences between the group. How did they choose to visualize power?

Research Project

- ★ In small groups students will research Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What is the story? Who is the character of *Macbeth*? What happens to him? When did Shakespeare write this play? What are people's opinions about the play?
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is to have students work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to it. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose.

That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.

- » What characters can be derived from the poem?
- » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
- » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Adaptation Exercise: Tragedy to Comedy

- ★ As a class, discuss a well-known serious story. Something that ends in tragedy.
 - » E.g., Grimm's original fairy tales or Hans Christian Andersen.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups where they will create a one-minute adaptation of the story.
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to turn the tragic story into a comedy. This is not about repeating the story and adding a wacky tone to the acting. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the new version of the story has to have comedic elements written in.
- ★ Groups will discuss and rehearse. Ask each group how they are going to change their story to change the genre.

- ★ Groups will present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Macbeth Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a section from the original play, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It is suggested that you read the opening moment with the witches.
- ★ Identify any words students don't understand.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the original section.
- ★ Next, groups are to discuss, decide, rehearse, and come up with a one-minute scene. They're not trying to adapt the whole original section of text, just a moment. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges? How would students modernize the text?
- ★ After groups have presented, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Superstitions

- ★ Research and discuss theatrical superstitions, like the one where it's bad luck to say *Macbeth* when you're on a stage. What are you supposed to do to get rid of the bad luck if someone says *Macbeth* on stage?
- ★ Divide students into groups and have them create a one-minute scene on the concept of superstitions. Do they believe in superstitions? Why or why not?

- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. Was there any difference of opinion in the groups about whether or not to take superstitions seriously? How did they resolve those conflicts to create their scene? Was there any compromise?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Mmmbeth* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What happens when Twit tries to say Mmmbeth's real name?
3. How does Queen Duncan respond when told she dies in Act 2?
4. What do the witches tell Mmmbeth he's going to become?
5. How does Lady Mmmbeth change when she receives Mmmbeth's letter?
6. True or False: Mmmbeth does not want to kill Queen Duncan.
7. How does Lady Mmmbeth distract MacDuff?

8. Who is Fleance?
9. Who kills Banquo?
10. What does Big Mama Hecate tell Mmmbeth?
11. How does Mmmbeth respond?
12. How does Lady Mmmbeth take her own life?
13. Why doesn't MacDuff fight Mmmbeth?
14. Who is the Stunt MacDuff?
15. What's the "technicality" that kills Mmmbeth?
16. Do you have any questions about the play?
17. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. What is the definition of a parody and why is *Mmmbeth* categorized as such?
2. What is the storytelling style in this adaptation?
3. There are opportunities in the play for male roles to be played by female actors. In fact, the playwright is open to having Mmmbeth played by a woman. In your opinion, how would this story told from a female perspective impact an audience?
4. How does the playwright use Shakespeare's language in their adaptation?
5. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a serious drama. *Mmmbeth* is a dark comedy. How does the story change with the change in genre?
6. Based on Lady M's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?
7. Based on Queen Duncan's language, what can you infer about her personality?

8. What is significant about the line, "There are more theatre traditions, Twit, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"?
9. What is significant about the line, "Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full of the milk of human kindness"?
10. What is significant about the line, "Thou canst not say I did it: never shake thy gory locks at me"?
11. What is significant about the line, "Yet here's a spot: All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh oh oh"?
12. Are there any words you don't understand? Identify and define them.
13. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Mmmbeth*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about ambition? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. Why do you think the playwright chose to adapt Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a comedy?
4. Has the playwright made it easier to understand Shakespeare's language? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast your experience with ambition to what happens in the play.
6. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?

- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Which moment stood out to you the most? Why?
- ★ In your opinion, does *Macbeth* work as a comedy? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize it in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Ambition Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss the concept of ambition, specifically its relationship to power and connect it to what they read in the play.
- ★ Based on their discussion and what they read in the play, have each group create their own theatrical moment on the concept of ambition, specifically its relationship to power.

- ★ How does this moment differ from what students presented in the pre-read activities?

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Modern Adaptation

- ★ Here's what author Allison Willams says about writing a Shakespeare adaptation: "When I write spoof adaptations of Shakespeare, one of my biggest intentions is to preserve and clarify some of the beautiful original text, while opening up the story with modern language and ideas. Often, I begin by looking at the plays as an actor, trying to figure out the logic and ideas in each scene."
- ★ Divide students into groups. They are to create a modern adaptation of the opening scene from the original play *Macbeth* that combines the original text with modern language and ideas.
- ★ The scene must take place in the present, the three witch characters must be modern characters (whatever that means to students), and there must be three lines from the original text included in their dialogue.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. What was it like to modernize a Shakespeare scene? What was it like to combine modern language and ideas with the

original Shakespeare language? How did their scenes compare and contrast to the scene in *Mmmbeth*?

Macbeth Superstitions

- ★ Here's what author Allison Williams has to say about the superstitions surrounding *Macbeth*: "While I am a normal, rational human being, something bad happens to me every time I am involved with the Scottish play. I have lost my wallet twice (once temporarily, once permanent). Lost my cool. Lost my luggage. Lost my way. Hated my director. Been savagely reviewed. Had major car trouble. Twice. So when my students or fellow actors quote from the play, or say the title in a theatre, I do indeed make them leave the room, turn around three times, spit, curse and ask permission to come back in."
- ★ Divide students into groups. They will create a short scene in which some of the characters fully believe the *Macbeth* superstition (including the remedy) and some do not.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. Who is superstitious? Who is not? What does each group of people think about the other? Can you be empathetic to those who have different beliefs? Why or why not?