

KIDS ON BIKES

FREE CONTENT FRIDAY
FEBRUARY 2020

SOMETHING WEIRD THIS WAY COMES:
DUNSHINANE HIGH SCHOOL

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written by Jack Bathke and Doug Levandowski

Doug's Note: This is an adventure prompt that I wrote with a fellow English teacher and gaming buddy. Jack also does a lot of work with theater—and we both love Macbeth, though Jack insists on calling it The Scottish Play. This was my go-to adventure prompt to run at conventions, though now that it's getting released to the world, I'll have to come up with something else...

Content Warnings: theater superstition, bullying, high school romances, poisoning, evangelical religion

SETTING INFORMATION

Dunsinane, Kentucky is a small community with a smaller high school and an even smaller theater community. So small that it's not uncommon for Chet Barker, the school's enthusiastic football coach and reluctant director, to strongarm his football players into taking roles in the play. It's during the off-season anyway, right?

After years of pressure from the school board to “do a Shakespeare,” the school's putting on Macbeth. Coach Barker picked that one, not knowing about the superstitions surrounding it, just because it's one of Shakespeare's shortest. A few of the more committed theater kids complained, but Coach told them he didn't believe in all of that stuff.

On the first day of rehearsals, he gave a long speech about standing on your own two feet and not worrying about “old wives' tales” and “silly superstition”. The actors and tech crew thought his monologue would never end, but when he fell backwards into the orchestra pit breaking both of his legs, he stopped.

Now, the show must go on, so Helena Mandible, English teacher of about forty years, agreed to take over. She doesn't know enough about directing to know that she knows nothing about directing. Add that to the fact that Principle Tex wants to censor some of the racier and bloodier scenes, and you've got a good recipe for dissent among the kids who take acting seriously.

Besides, there has been some weird, weird stuff happening behind the scenes. Is it the curse? Is it someone causing toil and trouble? Or is it just the general incompetence of high schoolers? The theater was built back in the 30s and hasn't been updated since then. It could just be that. Right?

SETTING TOUCHSTONES

- *Macbeth* (play)
- *Scotland, PA* (movie)
- *Waiting for Guffman* (movie)

- *Smash* (television show)
- *Camp* (Movie)

Instead of the standard town creation questions, pose these questions to the players instead:

- **Group:** Other than Coach's injury, what three weird events have happened during the rehearsals?
- **Group:** How close are you to the opening night?
- **Individual, Shared:** What's your role in the production?
- **Individual, Shared:** If you are an actor, how is your character similar to you?
- **Individual, Shared:** What is one acting ritual that you always follow?
- **Individual, Shared (though you may lie):** If you're a techie, how do you feel about the actors? If you're an actor, how do you feel about the techies?

POSSIBLE POINTS OF INTEREST

- The Orchestra Pit, where kids go to make out during rehearsal. Some kids have stopped going down there, though, because they've been hearing strange whispers from the darkest parts of the shadows.
- The Flies, the catwalks and rafters above the stage where the more experienced tech crew kids hang out. Recently, they've seen a figure up there, too—but not with any way of them having gotten up there.
- The Director's Office, where Ms. Mandible stores all of her materials for the show. She's the only one with a key to the room. Well, her and Miranda Black...
- Principal Tex's Office, where Ms. Mandible and others have been regularly called to argue about censorship of the play.
- The Green Room, which isn't exactly green (a point Lucius will routinely make) where the kids go to chill, prepare, do their relaxation exercises, run a scene perhaps, tell jokes and dirty stories, or gossip.

POSSIBLE THREATS

- The Fellowship for Artists' Responsibility in Theater, a group of evangelical parents who are pressuring Principal Tex to further censor the play.

- As an existential threat, the school board makes cuts to the program because they don't see any legitimacy in having a theater program in the school.

POSSIBLE POWERED CHARACTERS

- The figure in *The Flies*, the ghost of a student who died here during the construction of the theater in 1932. He is good natured and kind. He just wants to finally be able to act in the play so that his soul can rest peacefully.
- Steph Onyeka, a junior who just discovered that she can control technology with her mind. If her powers were more reliable, that'd make her a great techie. Trouble is, they sometimes misfire...

POSSIBLE MONSTERS

- A theater ghost, most likely a child, who was supposedly killed in the high school, likes stroking long hair, yelling for people, and generally causing mayhem.
- The Shadows, the strange figures in the depths of the Orchestra Pit's darkness. No one knows what they want or what "the denouement" is, but given their penchant for possessing kids, it's probably not good.
- The Three Specters, a trio of three figures who appear only when characters are completely alone. They promise great things to that person for a terrible price.

POSSIBLE NPCS

- **Chet "Coach" Barker**, the director of the play who has been sidelined with two broken legs after falling off the stage. He's most concerned about how this injury will affect his ability to coach football next season.
- **Lucius "Luke" Ferrell**, a freshman who takes himself and drama far too seriously. Everyone calls him Luke, but he insists on being called Lucius, which isn't even his name. He loves to namedrop acting teachers (like Meisner, Strasberg, Adler, and, of course, Lipton). Though he only has the part of Second Murderer, he knows every line of the play by heart. As a self-proclaimed method actor, he may have even considered how to best get into character...
- **Dexter "Dex" Jones**, senior quarterback for the football team and Macbeth. Without any acting experience but a nice, loud voice,

Dex was recruited to the play by Coach. What he lacks in skill (and that lack is profound), he makes up for in enthusiasm, bless his heart. And he did manage to eventually memorize all his lines. More or less...

- **Helena Mandible**, the English teacher who took over for Coach after his accident. Though she has never directed before, she acted once in a community theater production about twenty years ago and has some ideas about how things should be run.
- **Miranda Saltanat**, the stage manager. A sophomore, she dresses in black and believes that there is no problem that can't be solved with a little duct tape. In fact, she gets irritated whenever someone refers to it as "duck tape". She also secretly carries a key ring with every key to the school, though she's cagey about how she got it.
- **Jeremy Durphman**, a senior, sometime performer, but mostly he just hangs around the theater because he loves it. He knows every theater superstition and gets upset every time someone commits one of them, demanding restitution immediately.
 - **A side note:** he gets apoplectic if one spells theater the "wrong" way.
- **Robert "Principal Tex" Givens**, the principal. He worries that a play featuring the killing of a monarch will have a deleterious effect on the student body. He attends every rehearsal "just to make sure everything is going well."
- **Troy Sudarshan**, a senior. He lives in the biggest house in town, and his parents bank-roll the production, making sure they have authentic period costumes and sets because authenticity is "extremely important" to them. Troy is purported to have been to New York City once to see *Les Miserables*.

POSSIBLE ADVENTURE HOOKS

- A bad dress rehearsal actually means a good show; a dress rehearsal (or simply a rehearsal) where everything goes wrong—the costumes arrived but nothing fits, the sets keep falling down, the actors call for lines, etc.
- Dex is missing. Not, like, not in school. Like, literally missing. He went behind a curtain to get changed, and then went completely silent. Like, he's gone gone.
- After someone brought in cookies for everyone, a lot of the actors are feeling incredibly sick. No one knows who brought the cookies, but everyone blames Luke.

- The whispers in the Orchestra Pit are getting louder, and a couple who went down there for a makeout sesh came back with dull, glassy eyes and talking about “the denouement coming soon”.
- The figure in The Flies has asked the techies for help in setting his soul to rest. He’s a sweet kid, and he would probably make a good Apparition in Act IV, Scene 1.
- While in the theater late one night, working on light cues, Miranda hears her name being called. She presumes it is the theater ghost and ignores it. The voice gets louder and more ominous, which is odd for the theater ghost. When she goes to investigate, the lights suddenly go out, and well, so does she. When the rest of the theater troupe arrives the next morning, they find the word, “Hands,” written on the lighting booth in black gaffer’s tape.
- Helena Mandible has the idea to set the opening of the play in an actual battlefield, strewn with body parts (a leg, a foot, an eyeball, etc.). She feels that this will give the witches a verisimilitude that is right for the play. She goes to the local butcher and purchases a very large femur from a cow, brings it to the theater and leaves it backstage without treating it. Eventually, a smell creeps into the theater...
- Jeremy is getting increasingly strange, both in his insistence about how to overcome superstitions and, more concernedly, what those rituals must involve. How far will he go to carry out these rituals, and are they merely for protection?
- The Birnam Wood Lumber Company has raised their prices on wood which causes Helena and the kids to pursue other means for building the set. So, Miranda takes her father’s axe out to the woods one day and goes missing.
- Troy has not been sleeping for several nights, making sure the costumes for the play are historically accurate. He begins to have strange dreams where he is visited by Shakespeare or Richard Burbage or James I , who tells him the real story behind the curse of the play. He tries to tell the rest of the cast, but unfortunately, because of sleep-deprived state, no one believes him.

ADJUSTMENTS TO RULES

Rule Addition: Theater Tropes

Each of the players must be involved with the play in some way. During questions, each player will choose whether they’re an actor or a member of the stage crew. Alternatively, players could take the role of a teacher closely

involved with the production, but whatever role they take, they must be present in the theater for all rehearsals and performances.

Rule Addition: Coming up with one's Back story (Tablework)

When establishing your character's backstory, tell the table two things that you claim to have done involving theater. Neither should be verifiable by the other players. Then, secretly make a Snap Decision stat check for both, using different stats and trying to meet a difficulty of 8. If you succeed at the check, you have done the thing you claim to have done. If you fail the check, you have not done the thing you claim to have done.

For example, Miranda (if she were a PC), claims to have made out with Intira Kulap, the super hot senior who graduated the day after the production last year. Miranda rolls her Charm, a d10. If she rolls an 8 or higher, it's true: though the other players might not believe her, she totally made out with Intira last year. If she rolls a 7 or lower, though, it's not true; Miranda might have made a pass at Intira, but she rebuffed her—but no one knows for sure.

Rules Addition: Deus Ex Machina

Each player receives one "Deus Ex Machina", which they can spend to safely resolve any problem they're encountering. To use the Deus Ex Machina, the player announces that they wish to use it, and then the GM narrates the highly unexpected, incredibly strange, but totally effective way that the universe solves the problem for the character. If all players agree that the resolution is not sufficiently absurd, the GM must rewind and try again.

Rule Addition: Theater Superstitions

When facing a difficult stat check, a character can receive superstitious help from their fellow thespians. If a character uses a theater superstition, they can give another player +3 on a Snap Decision stat check. Each superstition may only be used once, after which it cannot confer +3 again in the game. Narratively, though, characters who see that a superstitious tradition works are likely to use it in the future even if players know there's no mechanical benefit.

Some theater superstitions: *yelling "heads" before raising or lowering the flies, saying "merde" or "break a leg" before going onstage, the ghost light, getting blood on the set is actually good luck for a production, a bad dress rehearsal means a good show, being sure to leave at least one light on in the theater, and of course the mother of all superstitions, never quoting lines or using the title of the play, Macbeth.*