Performance Lore

The world of theater is a mysterious place filled with illusions of grandeur. To the audience the stage is a strange place where stories come to life. Seeing back stage breaks that spell, and beautiful ball gowns are revealed as dress-up box rejects, while handsome princes are just guys who don't have time to remove their caked on stage makeup before changing into jeans and a t-shirt to skateboard home.

It takes a special type of person to pretend to be someone else for a night. There is a great deal of vulnerability to acting that most people cannot accept. To appear weak is terrifying when every instinct says to cover that which is not strong. To utilize that weakness to invoke emotion in a comfortably covered up audience takes a great deal of strength. There is no earthly guarantee that a performance will be good, or even the same every night. Instead, many actors and other performers fall into superstitions and good luck charms to guarantee their performance after all they can do.

Even after that, live theater is dangerous and unpredictable. Even with precautions, practice, and good luck charms, mishaps do happen. Once they do, it is all on the skill of the actor to make sure that the show goes on as gracefully as possible. If the show cannot go on gracefully, then actors must endeavor to turn mistakes into comedy.

Mishaps

Theater Disasters: A Narrative Collection (FA 01 1630)

Part of the reason that theater is so superstitious is the unpredictability of live performance. Some really great moments happen unscripted, but more often things go wrong. There is a strong oral tradition of theater mishaps dating back for the past four hundred years.

BYU has its own stories. Once upon a time they attempted to use a fog machine and it burst into flames. Another time, they used heavy wagons on slanted stage. One night the railing holding the wagon to the floor failed and the wagon ruined most of the stage. At Ricks College, now BYU-Idaho, they used a turn table stage, and the motor got stuck, so the stage would not stop spinning for two hours.

During a traveling performance, an actor was dancing with an arrow that she accidentally flung into the audience of small children. No one was hurt, and a child brought it back to the stage, but it could have been a very bad event. There are a few stories of productions where an actor or prop fell into the
orchestra pit, though usually no one was hurt, occasionally things land in instruments and stop the music for a bit.

During a high school rehearsal, a light was left too close to the curtains, and they caught fire. While the building was being evacuated, the director had a heart attack. In plays where live animals are used, there have been many incidents. Sometimes the animals will be spooked and kick over set pieces. Sometimes they’ll fall into the orchestra pit, sometimes they will decide to relieve themselves at inopportune times.

Trick weapons are often used in theater. Unfortunately, sometimes trick weapons get switched out with real ones and actors end up actually being stabbed. Fly systems, where the weight of the actor is precisely balanced against some kind of counter weight to allow them to be hoisted across the stage, can also bring difficulty should an understudy of a different weight be needed. In an instance where the main actor was accidentally stabbed, his significantly heavier understudy replaced him and had to be flown. He was too heavy for the settings. He had to ad lib while they added weight to the fly system, and ended up flying quite fast when too much weight was added.

In another show, the boards on the floor were ill placed. When the lead stepped on a certain board, it shifted the set and stabbed a small child on the stage with a protruding nail. He wasn’t badly hurt, but he was rightfully terrified.

While most of the difficulties of the stage are resulted from accidents with equipment, many of them are just dumb luck, so it would behoove the people of the stage to garner some good luck to accompany their performance.

**Excuse Me Gov’nor: Mishaps on Hale Center Theater Stages (FA 01 2273)**

Even when they are not physically dangerous, mistakes on stage are often embarrassing or awkward. Whether the mistakes lead to an angry audience or a house filled with laughter is really dependent on the skill of the actors in smoothing it over.

One actor accidentally broke a set couch during a dramatic kissing scene. There was no way to cover it up, so the actors just kept referring back to the incident during the rest of the play. The audience felt as though they were in on the joke, so though it was actually thematically inappropriate for the play, the night was a huge success.
Another big mistake was when a prop pillow exploded feathers everywhere. Though the adult actors had trouble keeping a straight face, the child actor merely commented on the snow and continued with the scene.

Sitting in the front row of a live performance can be a dangerous venture, as things are liable to get thrown about a bit, and occasionally the audience can be a target for those things that get out of hand. Boxes or picture frames have been known to find their way into the first few rows.

The audience can also end up seeing a bit more of the actors than they might desire to see. In one performance of *April Ann*, the grandmother is supposed to come out wearing a parachute as a dress, and the children are supposed to lift it up while she twirls to reveal her bloomers. The actor forgot her bloomers in the complex costume change, and though the children thought her protesting was just part of the performance, she was really reluctant to reveal her lacey underwear to the entire audience, though they seemed to think it was just a particularly daring gag.

Another actor in the same production forgot her slip, and revealed her “Wednesday” labeled underwear to the audience in the bright lights of the stage.

Sometimes actors can lose parts of their costumes in the middle of a production. One actor in particular, almost lost her pants to a bum who had wandered in off the street. Once she’d explained her need for the pants, the bum helped her change, but it was a near thing.

Another “daring gag” came during a show with a strict religious character that came on stage with his fly undone. His red underwear showed up brightly against his stuffy clothes, and he did not even notice the error. In the center stage, there would be no way for him to correct himself anyway, so a cockney maid character walked up to him, said “Excuse me, gov’nor” and zipped him up before continuing with their scripted introduction.

During a production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, a fifteen gallon can of milk slowly tipped over and poured all over the stage. During a song, the townspeople all came out and wiped up the mess with towels, and the show went on, the audience just thinking that the milk mess was planned because it fit so well in the song.
Superstitions

Opera Lore (FA 01 1199)

There is a superstition that Opera singers should never see the conductor before a performance. He is given a separate dressing room as accommodation for this belief. Many performers have their own personal good luck rituals, mostly regarding food, though occasionally concerning exercise or other activities. A few successful opera singers believe in eating a large steak before a performance, or even having ice cream right before a show.

Most opera singers believe that it is bad luck to talk to the director the day of the performance, so they will avoid any interaction. This comes from a director’s tendency to give last minute advice, and the danger that too many changes can have to a performer.

Good luck charms are common, things like crystals or purses or even special underwear that were worn on a good performance night and become a regular on the stage to ensure continued good performances. Performers can get so caught up in their own rituals and comforts that they may choose to put their demands into their contracts. For example, one opera diva received a poor review on a night when she wore a yellow dress. She decided that yellow was an unlucky color for her, so she put into her contract a stipulation that she never be made to wear yellow.

An Italian tenor would only sing if he had holy water before a performance, and put it into his contract, so the day before a performance, when he didn’t have any, the stage manager had to track down the holy water and have it shipped in from the specific church in New York.

Luciano Pavarotti held a handkerchief for good luck during solo performances. He began this practice because his nerves caused him to perspire so heavily that he had to wipe his face multiple times a night, and he found it convenient to just leave something in his hand. Clutching the handkerchief tightly also gave his tension a focal point besides his voice, so it was a useful prop.

Much of the book, Phantom of the Opera, and its later musical were based on actual settings and events of the Paris Opera House. There is an actual lake below the opera house, as well as a labyrinth of tunnels and bridges and things that the public do not have access to. There are five basements below the opera house, and at the time when the book is set, there were a series of gruesome suicides. Stage hands and other crew members would utilize the basements for the purpose of hanging themselves, and wouldn’t be found for weeks.
There was even a masked man who frequented a certain box at the opera. The Parisian newspapers refer to him as ‘The Persian,’ but he was also reported to be like a phantom, because he just showed up, and no one really had a chance to talk to him.

The operatic version of Macbeth has a ghost that haunts it, though it isn’t as much of a nuance as the curse that follows the original work.

**The Scottish Play: The Curse of Macbeth and BYU Theatre Students (FA 01 1217)**

Macbeth has a long and storied history of deaths and dismemberment, leading theaterites to avoid even mentioning its name for fear of invoking the curse. Even just adding Macbeth to a season will curse all the shows that season. Mysterious accidents will occur during all the shows.

According to legend, the first instance of the curse was on the premiere, when the young boy playing Lady Macbeth died during the performance. Shakespeare himself was directing, and some believe that he had to replace the boy as Macbeth’s Lady. The curse has plagued the play ever since.

BYU Theater has its own record of the curse, though it has been a tad bit more benevolent than other theater locations. One theater student didn’t believe in the curse and chanted Macbeth over and over in the theater to prove her disbelief. The next night, the light board went out, and she tripped and broke her toe. During one production, an actor got his lip split open when he was supposed to be pretending to be knocked out on a cistern. An actress slipped off her chair and ended up smashing a laptop computer. Another young man didn’t believe in the curse and chanted Macbeth over and over backstage of his own show, and ended up with a beetle crawling up his body during the entire closing scene, only for it to bite him on the chin as the lights went down.

The only way to remove the curse is to leave the theater, spin thrice, swear, spit, and knock on the theater door to humbly ask for admittance.

Other theater superstitions include a prohibition against whistling backstage or including peacock feathers on a costume. Because stage hands would signal to each other with whistles, actors couldn’t whistle, or the cues would get messed up and someone would be hit with a set piece.

One student at another university was in charge of closing up the theater after rehearsals. During her shift, she noticed someone dancing on stage. Due to the limited nature of stage spaces, she was used to people sneaking in to use the theater space for extra practice time. She ignored the dancer until it
was time to lock the doors. At that point, she tried to get the dancer’s attention to no avail. Her voice had no effect on the dancer until she got very close. Only then did the dancer stop, and she noticed that the dancer was lacking eyes as it sunk through the floor.

**Superstitions of the Theatre (FA 01 1375)**

Acting takes a kind of bravery not found in most professions. On a stage, the actor has one chance to succeed or fail, and either way will be witnessed by hundreds of people. This sort of gambling act breeds superstitions, because there is no way to guarantee a good performance beyond the confidence of the actor.

Superstitions prohibiting the use of certain colors for costumes stem from practical purposes as well as traditional connotation. Green is taboo on the stage because it looks poorly in many types of lighting. There are few alternate theories on why it is so universally loathed. Some believe the stigma stems from the time when actors used to perform in grassy fields, and didn’t wish to blend in. Others insist that fairies claim green as their own color, and get jealous when actors appropriate it. There is also a theory that claims that traditional spotlights were green, so actors wearing green under a green light would be canceled out.

Other colors that have associations attached to them are blue and yellow. Blue draws attention on stage, so should only be used on a character that is meant to have all eyes on them. Yellow is arbitrarily unlucky because it was the color that represented the devil in medieval plays.

Costumes are an important part of superstitions because they are involved in every play. Many theater companies have very small budgets for costumes, and reuse bits and pieces, if not entire costumes, over and over. Because of this, the previous success of a garment has to be considered. A costume from a successful performance is supposed to help a new performance be just as successful, so at least a bit of the old costume should be included in the new costume.

A gypsy robe is similar. A gypsy refers to a chorus member of a big Broadway musical. For each big musical, a gypsy who has the robe from the previous musical will pass it on to a gypsy of the current musical. Each hand through which the robe passes must add a souvenir from the play he or she was a part of. The robe should be absolutely covered with memorabilia, and look a tad bit ridiculous when the gypsy presented with it is forced to wear it and strut across the stage. Afterwards, it’ll be hung in the dressing room where everyone can see and touch it for good luck.
Squeaking shoes are also good luck. Cheap shoes squeak more; so many superstitious actors will purposely get cheap shoes and hope that they’ll squeak on their first entrance.

The University of Pennsylvania Library is rumored to possess a pair of Shakespeare’s gloves. Anyone who dons them is doomed to die within the year though.

Makeup has its own lore and traditions associated with it, from placement to idioms associated with the practice of applying stage makeup. One tradition rules that new makeup should never be used until a show is at least a week old. A few actors have attempted to implement an order to how makeup should be arranged, but most veteran actors considerer clean, organized makeup the sign of over-enthusiastic amateur actors.

A few actors insist on completely new makeup in times of crisis, because of a story passed down for generations of a jealous rival who inserted a needle into a stick of makeup and left the star of the show to rip his face to pieces as he made himself up.

A popular greeting among older actors was once “skin off your nose.” Referring to the skin damaging effects of old stage makeup, and the hope that the actor would get more work and thus have more chances to apply more skin ruining makeup.

Rehearsals have certain superstitions developed to ensure a good performance. One superstition is the prohibition from uttering the last line of the play during rehearsals. Many actors believe that leaving the ‘tag line’ unrehearsed will lead to a tiny bit of worry during the first performance and lend a natural tension to the show.

Likewise, bringing a bible or a script to the stage is considered bad luck. No one is sure exactly why the script is bad luck, beyond the possibility of forming a crutch. The bible is bad luck because it is considered disrespectful to God, so ordinary books are painted to look like bibles whenever a bible is necessary for a play.

Once the performance comes, the superstitions don’t stop. Looking out at an incoming audience through the gap in the curtains is really bad luck, as well as lowering curtains after a dress rehearsal because it is bad luck to perform a play without an audience. After a performance, some actors touch the curtain as it comes down to ensure good notices.
Lore of the dressing room states that having soap in the dressing room is good luck, though the reasoning behind the belief has been lost. It is also believed that the one sitting nearest the door will be the one to get sacked. The seat is unlucky because it is the worst seat in the room, given to the newest member of the company because they have not earned their place yet.

Though the box office and producers are meant to be more practical than their emotional artist counterparts, they are not immune from their own luck beliefs. The run of the show can be predicted after a successful first night by the first person to buy a ticket. If they pay using a torn bill, the show will be off within a week. If they are an old man, the play will run for a year. If they are both an old man and use a torn bill, the show will split the difference and run for six months.

Producers will never give free tickets to cross eyed men or any women for fear of the bad luck attached to such people. They are also careful to never open on a Friday or odd numbered day. Tuesdays are the best days for a show to open, and it is better to open a new show right after a flop, hoping that the critics will have spent all their vitriol on the previous piece.

Individual theaters have their own ghosts and theater specific traditions. BYU-Idaho has two theater ghosts. One was a man who fell from the construction scaffolding while building the fly loft of the Snow Theatre. He haunts a rope attached to the fly system. The rope spins on its own in the wings, while all the surrounding ropes are completely still. The other ghost haunts the Kirkham Arena Theatre of Ricks College. He has talked to a few of the custodians, but otherwise seems content to watch the goings on of the theater.

Depending on the theater, an energy circle, or a prayer circle may be a tradition to relax actors before a performance. Catholic theaters may have a prayer to Saint Genesius, the patron saint of actors. In the Magic Theatre of San Francisco, one of the artistic directors always insisted that the words “forest green” be added to the dialogue of the shows performed there.

Many theaters start their shows exactly thirteen minutes late. Though it could be considered a superstition due to the exact number, it is a more practical purpose. American play-goers are notoriously tardy.

Thirteen is usually really bad luck in theaters, except when it concerns titles. Plays with thirteen letter titles are quite lucky and successful. Plays with the word “green” in the title are likewise very lucky. Peacock has the opposite effect. Plays with “peacock” in the title will be unlucky no matter
where they play. In America only, plays with “bomb” or “turkey” in the titles will be unmitigated disasters.

Music can also be unlucky, mostly due to association. “Home Sweet Home,” “Marriage Bells,” and “Nearer my God to Thee,” have all been attached to plays that closed early. To avoid closing a play early, sometimes the best option is to try not to do anything like what previous flops have done. Likewise, it is also bad luck to say good luck, because the nature of the gods of theater is contrary. The best way to disperse bad luck is to swear. Obscene words banish evil spirits.

Some pantomimes are considered unlucky. They are the shows that include complex effects like trapdoors and smoke. They are “unlucky” because it’s difficult and dangerous to work effects. They stand a much larger chance of going wrong. Another practical superstition is attached to repertory companies. Unlike normal theaters that cast each play in their season separately, repertory companies sign on their cast for an entire season and cast them in every play. After performing for a season, the entire cast gets sick the moment their contract is up. Some think this is a curse, but most people just believe that the cast soldier through any sickness, and then succumb to the stress of their year after their contracts are up.

Many actors have their own superstitions and rituals. One actor gained energy by shouting at an empty wall. He claimed it reflected and multiplied the energy already inside him. Another actor liked to pick a scent for each character she played. Some actors always travel the same route to the theater. None of these rituals have any major following. A more common practice is “walking the theater.” They will test size and acoustics, and knowing the theater is important to a comfortable performance.

Actors who want a role too much are doomed to get it and completely fail at it. The superstition is based a bit in the belief that if someone lusts after a role for too long, they’ll have too many preconceived notions of who the character is to take direction from the director. They will not be able to compromise on the role, and that will spell their own doom.

Cats are subject to much superstition, both good and bad. Apparently it is rather common for a theater to keep a cat. The wardrobe mistress is in charge of taking care of the cat, and as long as the cat is back stage, it is a good luck charm. However, if the cat should happen to cross the stage, it is terrible luck.

Why Do We Believe: A Collection of Theatre Superstitions (FA 01 2302)
Actors are a small part of the army of people it takes to pull off a successful show. They are not the only people who need luck and to avoid offending the Gods of theater. Each group of people has their own superstition, and it would be a mistake to think any part of the theater world is not superstitious.

It is bad luck for shoes to be overhead, so they must always be kept on a low shelf or the floor. Both actors and costumers adhere to this tradition, though there is no story behind the belief.

There actually is a story behind the hatred of peacock feathers in the theater world. The eye of the peacock feather is associated with the evil eye, and theaters are often cursed by peacock feathers, patterns or motifs. However, if a feather is used accidentally, and nothing bad happens, that breaks the curse, so some enterprising directors will hide feathers on the stage, and bring them out after a successful production to break the curse on the theater.

The costume shop has a very particular tradition when it comes to the colors of stitching in the mockup of costumes. “Stitched in white cutter’s delight, stitched in red better off dead, stitched in green never be seen, and stitched in grey saves the day.”

Each different type of performer has a different good luck saying. “Break a leg” is common among actors, because it curses their most important attribute. For singers, who don’t need to use their legs, it is more appropriate to say “in bocca al lupo” which means “in the wolf’s mouth.” Cursing their voice allows them to go sing on stage without evoking the gods’ jealousy of their beautiful voice.

One theater company believed that it brought “good woo” to the theater to leave candy out. One of the people who worked there enjoyed this tradition, and spent a lot of time eating the candy left out. Another theater has the practice of sneaking a can of Dr. Pepper onto the stage for luck. Sometimes it is part of the décor, sometimes just a hidden totem.