

from the FOOTLIGHTS

MARCH 2013

“Life shouldn’t be all work and no plays.” <http://www.footlightsdc.org>

Witchcraft. But Where? Footlights to Discuss *Voodoo Macbeth* March 18

“Double, double, toil and trouble. Fire burn and cauldron bubble!” So chant the witches of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The American Century Theater (TACT) now brings us its own cauldron. TACT combines Shakespeare’s play, Orson Welles’ 1936 adaptation – set in the voodoo culture of Haiti with witchdoctors and staged with an all-black cast in Harlem – and a return of the whole evil psychological brew to Scotland, but not to Macbeth’s Scotland. It’s the Scotland of 2033, just 20 years from now, all in this new evolution of *Voodoo Macbeth*.

Some background on the origins of *Voodoo Macbeth*: It’s 1935, and the Roosevelt administration in a desperate effort to end the Great Depression and find work for the millions of unemployed, created and funded the Works Progress Administration (WPA), as part of The New Deal. A small fraction of the money was designated to be used specifically for the arts, including theater.

The New York Negro Theatre Project was organized and immediately hired 800 actors, technicians, and staff, and a 20-year old Orson Welles suggested they might want to use the all-black cast to do a version of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* set in Haiti, in the 19th century court of King Henri Christophe, with Voodoo priests as the witches, and Welles himself as director. The idea sounded interesting, some African drummers were hired, Central Park trees were stripped of many branches to make an on-stage Birnham Woods, and Virgil Thomson was asked to write some music for the production. The play was generally referred to as the “*Voodoo Macbeth*” as the details were worked out and rehearsals began – and the name stuck.

Voodoo Macbeth opened in April of 1936 to, putting it mildly, uproar. Many critics damned it. Welles had to explain his entire cast were deeply accomplished Shakespearean actors. A Wikipedia note about it says *Voodoo Macbeth* “proved inflammatory in the aftermath of the Harlem riots,” and it was “accused of making fun of black culture and as ‘a campaign to burlesque Negroes’ until Welles persuaded crowds that his use of black actors and voodoo made important cultural statements.”

But a Library of Congress exhibit on the New Deal’s Federal Theater Project, took another view: “When *Macbeth* opened in New York at the Lafayette Theatre (in

Harlem) on April 14, 1936, 10,000 people filled the streets in anticipation. Every one of the Lafayette’s 1,223 seats was filled. The play’s atmosphere was a sultry jungle with constant voodoo drumming, hot tropical colors, and supernatural scenes that were truly menacing. This critically acclaimed play not only helped to solidify the reputation of the FTP, but also provided the opportunity for African American actors, usually seen in only singing and dancing roles, to prove their ability to act in classic roles.”

Congress ended funding for the Negro Theater Project in 1939 because some conservative members decided too many of the Project’s plays dealt with what they felt were left-wing, possibly Communist, ideas.

Orson Welles went on to fame in Hollywood and to direct such films as the immortal *Citizen Kane*, and his *Voodoo Macbeth* – and The Negro Theatre Project – quietly faded into history.

So what cultural statements, about witchcraft, voodoo, psychology or anything else, will TACT make with its current production? **Jack Marshall**, artistic director of TACT, will explore all that with Footlights on **Monday, March 18** at Alfio’s.

“*Voodoo Macbeth* cannot be true to his (Welles’) vision if we stick closely to his staging and casting ideas,” Marshall says. “Welles believed theater should be exciting, surprising, and original... His Haiti concept was audacious in 1936, but would hold few surprises today. I decided to take Orson’s script, with his cuts and commentary, and entrust it to Kathleen Akerley, the local director who most embodies Welles’ fearless pursuit of dynamic theater, with his willingness to break rules and expectations to keep the stage... vivid, challenging, and controversial.”

We’ll meet for our dinner-discussion at Alfio’s Trattoria, located on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments, 4515 Willard Avenue in Chevy Chase, Maryland. The restaurant is just two blocks from the Friendship Heights metro stop on the red line. Street parking is limited but valet parking is free at Alfio’s, if you drive. Dinner is at 6:30 and the discussion begins at 7:30 and ends at 9. Cost for dinner is just \$13, and that includes tax and tip. You will get a salad, bread, choice among six entrees, ice cream, and tea or coffee. Cash or check – no credit cards, please. We appreciate a \$5

contribution to Footlights. Beer, wine, and cocktails are available from the bar. You may come for the discussion only if you wish.

Make reservations with Phyllis Bodin, at 301-986-1768 or phylbo@verizon.net. If you have to cancel, please let Phyllis know by noon on March 18, so we have an accurate count for the restaurant. We may have to pay for no-shows.

Voodoo Macbeth will play at TACT March 22 - April 13. Performances are held at The Gunston Arts Center, Theater II, 2700 South Lang Street, Arlington, VA 22206. See <http://www.americancentury.org/> for more information about the production.

April 10: *Ghost-Writer* by Michael Hollinger

Footlights returns to a favorite playwright when we discuss Michael Hollinger's *Ghost-Writer* on Wednesday, April 10. Hollinger's *Opus*, which Footlights discussed in 2011, was a powerful drama about a string quartet, drawing on Hollinger's background as a violist.

Our April play, *Ghost-Writer*, is also about creating art. but the similarity ends there. When novelist, Franklin

Woolsey dies mid-sentence, his secretary continues to take dictation. Is she committing fraud? And who is the ghost-writer?

With a dead man as a main character, this play is a director's dream. And we are lucky to have director **John Vreeke** to speak to us. In his lively previous visit to Footlights, Vreeke discussed Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. He is also joined by **Carolyn Griffin**, artistic director of Metro Stage where *Ghost-Writer* will be performed April 25 - June 2.

The play is published by Dramatists Play Service. See www.dramatists.com/cgi-bin/db/single.asp?key=4309.

We'll meet at Alfio's. To reserve, contact Phyllis Bodin, at 301-986-1768 or phylbo@verizon.net.

About Footlights

To learn more about Footlights, visit our website: <http://www.footlightsdc.org>. To subscribe to our e-list, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/footlightsdc/join>, or e-mail footlightsdc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

Calendar

- **Monday, March 18**, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of **Kathleen Akerley's** adaptation of **Orson Welles' *Voodoo Macbeth***. Our guest is **Jack Marshall**, artistic director of the American Century Theater. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Ave, Chevy Chase, MD 20815. Mark Gruenberg moderates. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, Phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.
- **Wednesday, April 10**, dinner-discussion of *Ghost-Writer* by **Michael Hollinger**. Our guests are **John Vreeke**, director, and **Carolyn Griffin**, artistic director of MetroStage. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Ave, Chevy Chase, MD 20815. Charlotte Baer moderates. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, Phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
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