

# Saying "break a leg" is just one of many stage superstitions

By Cricket Media, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.23.20

Word Count **805**

Level **710L**



In 1606 when a young actor in a Shakespeare play fell ill, Shakespeare himself stepped onstage to perform in the role. Now the play, though still widely performed, is considered cursed. Can you guess which one? Illustrations: Kellan Stover

It's 1606. The group of actors known as the King's Men are ready to perform for King James I. Their leader, William Shakespeare, wrote the play. It is "Macbeth." However, there's a problem. In Shakespeare's time, women characters were played by young men. The teenage boy cast as Lady Macbeth has fallen deathly ill. Shakespeare stepped into the role. Later the boy actor died, and the idea that Macbeth is a cursed play was born.

Superstitions around the play remain strong among actors. Superstitions are beliefs that are irrational or that have to do with magic or fate. For example, just saying the name "Macbeth" in a theater is considered bad luck. The only time it can be said is if the cast is rehearsing or performing. All other times, it is called "the Scottish play" or "the Bard's play."

However, if you slip up, don't worry. There's a way to prevent bad luck. Exit the theater, spin around three times and spit. Then say a Shakespearean insult -- like "poisonous bunch-backed toad."

## Theater Superstitions

Fears around "the Scottish play" are not the only theater superstitions. In fact, there are many others. If you're superstitious, here are some rules to follow to avoid disaster.

On opening night, tell your cast mates to "break a leg." Saying "good luck" to an actor is bad luck!

There are several ideas about where this superstition came from. One is that there are theater ghosts and fairies. They cause trouble by doing the opposite of what you say. Saying "break a leg" confuses them. They do the opposite, leaving you safe from harm.

After rehearsal, the stage manager may leave a lightbulb lit on the stage. This is the "ghost light." It is meant to scare away the ghost of Thespis.

He was the first actor in ancient Greece. Superstition has it that Thespis likes to sneak into empty theaters and cause problems. Maybe he's missing his days as a star thespian, or actor.

Luckily, leaving on the ghost light is also practical. People who enter the empty theater will be able to find the light switch without tripping over the set.

### "Bad Dress, Good Opening"

Imagine you're at dress rehearsal. Everyone is in costumes and makeup. This is the last practice before opening night. Everything goes horribly. Then, the director says, "Bad dress, good opening." The superstition is that if the dress rehearsal is terrible, opening night will be great. It also often turns out to be true. Opening-night excitement helps actors perform at their best.



Before opening night, be sure to leave your peacock feathers, mirrors, and real money and jewelry at home. These items are said to cause forgotten lines and other performance problems. Mirrors can mess up the onstage lighting. Valuables and real money lying around can encourage theft. However, the ban on peacock feathers is a little more mysterious. This "rule" is pure superstition.

Whistling in a theater is also frowned on. In the early days of large theaters, ropes were used to raise and lower sets and curtains.



Off-duty

sailors would take jobs backstage. They communicated with each other by whistling, just as they did when they were at sea. If a member of the audience whistled, the sailors might think they were getting a direction to lower a set at the wrong time, right on top of an actor's head.

### **Flowers After, Not Before, The Big Show**

If you're having trouble learning your lines, try sleeping with the script under your pillow. This superstition says that the lines will transfer from the page to your brain overnight. Science completely disproves this one, though. Really, you'll need to memorize your lines the old-fashioned way.

Finally, make sure your loved ones give you flowers after the performance, not before. Superstition has it that receiving flowers before the show can cause a boring performance. It's also a point of pride for actors. They want to earn their bouquets by putting on a great show.

Now you know what not to do in the theater. But sticking to these superstitions won't guarantee a flawless performance. That requires a bit more practice.

Break a leg!



## Quiz

- 1 How does the information in the section "Flowers After, Not Before, The Big Show" support the MAIN idea of the article?
- (A) It tells why people give actors flowers after shows.
  - (B) It describes why actors sleep with a script under their pillows.
  - (C) It gives examples of superstitions in the theater.
  - (D) It explains that science disproves many superstitions.
- 2 Select the sentence that summarizes the article.
- (A) Actors believe that following superstitions can help them do a good job.
  - (B) People say "break a leg" because they want to trick fairies in the theater.
  - (C) Superstition says that if a rehearsal is bad then the performance will be good.
  - (D) People should try to avoid saying "Macbeth" when they are in a theater.
- 3 What happened as a result of an actor playing Lady Macbeth dying?
- (A) Young men started to play women characters.
  - (B) Shakespeare had to play Lady Macbeth.
  - (C) Theaters stopped performing the play.
  - (D) People started to think the play was cursed.
- 4 WHY do stage managers think it is a good idea to leave a lightbulb on?
- (A) They believe it will help people to do their jobs backstage.
  - (B) They believe it will help actors to learn their lines.
  - (C) They believe it will keep things from being stolen.
  - (D) They believe it will scare away a ghost in the theater.