

Words and superstitions, passed down years

By **JONNO ROBERTS**

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Jonno Roberts: Theater diary

Jonno Roberts is writing weekly about his experiences rehearsing and performing in the Old Globe's Summer Shakespeare Festival for the Union-Tribune's Sunday Arts section. Roberts is playing Petruchio in "The Taming of the Shrew" and Edmund in "King Lear."

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Learn more about The Old Globe Theater at oldglobe.org.

We have emerged from the basement! Rehearsals in our subterranean studios are over and today we slithered, blinking, into the sunlight to begin the final staging, putting what has been devised in a studio with the outlines of the set taped out on the floor, onto the stage proper, with real walls, doors, stairs.

And what a rare and precious thing it is, to be doing this work out-of-doors! Actors spend their lives mewed up in windowless rehearsal rooms and theaters. Several of us were terrified that the kiss of sunlight may reduce us to ashes (however, while it is true that we share the same hours and some of the same habits as vampires, we have a profoundly different relationship to mirrors).

When we move into the theater we don't just move to a new building, we move into a sort of hallowed space. And forgive me if this sounds completely dorky, but there is a sort of magic that builds up in a theater. Think of the magic that accumulates in places like Fenway Park or, sigh, the old Yankee Stadium. There is sweat and blood, effort and triumph and defeat that leaches into the material of the structure. There are old friends who worked here that have passed on, and this stage is a tangible connection to their life's work.

The very words we speak have an almost Talmudic history: When Shakespeare's plays were first published, his original manuscripts were long gone, so the typesetters often had to rely on the recollection of the actors who spoke the lines in the original productions. Unique among playwrights, when we speak Shakespeare, we are speaking words passed down from fellow actors across the centuries.

And with those words, passed on from our predecessors, are other time-honored links: the rituals and superstitions, the habits of generations. We say "Break a leg" because it is considered terribly bad luck to wish "good luck." Whistling backstage is verboten — heavy things will fall on your head. Mentioning, or quoting from, the cursed play "Macbeth" is absolutely the worst and most dangerous crime — if you must refer to it, it is always as "the Scottish play."

So, we start to settle into our new home and our new clothes. The gorgeous ladies swoosh around in big hooped skirts,

with corsets shoving their boobs up around their chins. The lads strut around in topcoats and waistcoats and riding boots, like the peacocks from the zoo who occasionally visit us backstage.

And when dusk falls, and the slow process of Technical Rehearsal begins, we occupy our time backstage with the telling of theater war stories: the actor playing Chino in “West Side Story” who forgets to take his gun onstage and has to improvise, eventually killing Tony by kicking him while screaming “Poisoned shoe! Poisoned shoe!” (leaving Maria to say the immortal lines: “How much poison is left on this shoe, Chino? Enough for you? Enough for you? How much and still enough for me?”); the actor who starts a performance of “Twelfth Night” by mangling his opening line, and instead of saying “If music be the food of love, play on” says “If food be the ... aww &#*%!”; the performance of “Julius Caesar” where one of the murderers fails to grab a sprung knife and instead actually stabs Caesar, whose Shakespearean “Et tu, Brute?” turns into a string of curses of the bluest kind.

We tell these stories both to entertain, and to inoculate ourselves against misfortune. In our own way we are calling on the ever-present gods, ghosts and demons of the theater to bless our endeavor, to keep the swords blunt and the blood fake. Because a play is play — and like any time you play, it’s all fun and games until ... nah, I’m not going to tempt Fate. You’ll have to finish that one yourself.

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