

Health and Safety Tauro-Scatology

This month, Basil O'Saurus, *In Practice's* very own Professor of Tauro-Scatology, departs from his usual environmental pre-occupations to tell us about another of his sidelines. What is it this time, Prof?

It is a subject of relevance to *In Practice* readers because it deals with health and safety. Even though the situations described do not involve environmental practice, there should be something here for most readers, particularly the more anally-retentive of the IEEM membership.

Middle management, in other words?

I didn't say that.

Tell us what you are doing, then.

I'm health and safety consultant to a very contemporary production of *Macbeth*. You've no doubt seen Shakespeare productions that use modern dress and such like but where aspects of the production are still decidedly 17th century in their attitude.

Give us an example.

Well, *Macbeth*, of course, opens with the three witches on a blasted heath brewing a concoction. That may well have been appropriate in Shakespeare's day but I told the Director that this scene would now need to be set in a laboratory, with a fume hood, and that the witches would need appropriate protective clothing.

And how was this advice received?

Not very well. Especially when I added that *Macbeth* himself would not count as 'Authorised Personnel' so should not be allowed into the laboratory under any circumstances. But that was nothing compared to her reaction later when I rewrote Act II Scene 1.

What did you do?

Anyone with a 'Duty of Care' over employees and members of the public would spot the problem straight away. *Macbeth* commits a serious error when he asks 'Is this a dagger that I see before me?' If he suspects that there is a sharp-bladed implement on the premises, the correct action is to report it to his line manager, not to announce his vague suspicion to the audience. I did some mild editing so that *Macbeth* reports his concerns to the Stage Manager who, in this particular instance, is the de facto line manager. The Stage Manager then puts the house lights up, comes on stage and asks the audience to leave in an orderly manner so that the premises can be searched.

I bet the director loved that suggestion.

A few artistic disagreements, I admit. But all in the cause of ensuring a genuinely 'contemporary' feel. After all, the Scottish royal household that Shakespeare is describing is, in contemporary terms, a public body and Jobsworth health and safety officers are as much a feature of modern public bodies as

.... Performance targets? Re-organisations? Pay scales that lag behind their equivalent in the private sector?

I see that you are beginning to understand. We also had some problems later in the play, where Lady *Macbeth* is trying to clean her hands.

Wait a moment, you've skipped over the murder scene. Surely you can't avoid this?

We side-stepped this. Whilst murder itself is, obviously, out of the question, we felt that a bit of back-stabbing is inevitable within the management of contemporary public bodies. But to get back to Lady *Macbeth* Act V Scene 1, to be precise.

What happens here?

This is the scene where the sleepwalking Lady *Macbeth* tries to clean her hands of Duncan's blood. 'Out, damned spot' and all that.

Where's the problem?

If she had a role that involved her coming into contact with bodily fluids, she would, of course, have been wearing disposable gloves, so there is absolutely no need to have a scene in which she implies that bodily fluids have come into contact with her skin. I suggested that we replaced this line of dialogue with:

'A damned spot on my single-use latex glove, I say! – One; two; why, then 'tis time to do't. Forsooth, I will dispose of them and then wash my hands using hot water and anti-bacterial gel before drying them. I will also report this incident to my line manager so that appropriate preventative action can be taken in the future.'

A very contemporary take on the original version but, alas, it's not written in iambic pentameter.

That, give or take a few short adjectives, is roughly what the director said.

And is that where this story ends?

Not quite, the final place where I suggested a change was Act V where we have the fulfilment of the prophecy that *Macbeth* would die when Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane. And this is where, I think, *In Practice* readers will be particularly interested.

Why?

Because I replace the whole battle scene with a seminar on regeneration of native woodland in medieval Scotland. What is more, enough eminent academic speakers are invited to ensure that a number of competing theories regarding the potential for regeneration are presented. This, in turn, opens the way to a production of *Macbeth* with alternative endings.

Don't tell me – the audience vote for the one that they prefer.

Exactly. I bring the production values of Reality TV to Shakespeare.

And what did the director say about that?

Let's just say she was succinct.

I'm sure she was. Thanks for your time, Prof.

My pleasure.