



Superstitions in the Theatre Business

BOUQUET OF FLOWERS

The Superstition:

To receive a bouquet of flowers at the stage door BEFORE the play begins is an omen of failure. However, it is very lucky for an actress to receive flowers AFTER a performance

Origin:

Real flowers must never be used on stage. The problem with real flowers is that they have to be replaced; especially on a stage, which is given to all kinds of false light and dark throughout a day. Real, fresh flowers can be expensive; and I've never known a theatre company that has money to spare. Not to mention actors who may have pollen allergy.

FLOWERS FROM GRAVEYARDS:

The Superstition:

There is a closing night tradition in the theatre for the cast to give the director and/or leading lady a bouquet of flowers that has been stolen from a graveyard.

Origin:

Actors are typically poor and flowers and arrangements can be expensive. The site of a new funeral and freshly filled grave is a wealth of lavish flowers. For an actor, it seems, the macabre is no deterrent to thrift.

REHEARSAL

The Superstition:

Professional actors consider it a bad sign if a rehearsal is perfect. The play will have a very short run after a perfect rehearsal, or will go very badly. Similarly, it is extremely unlucky to speak the tag line, or the last line of the play, during rehearsals. The line which completes the play must not be spoken until the opening night of the show.

Origin: After a perfect rehearsal a cast and crew tends to feel as if they are 'prepared' for the production. They lose their nervous edge and adrenaline and, believing themselves to be fully prepared, stop paying close attention while on stage. The last line of a show completes the play, and a production is never complete until it is before an audience.

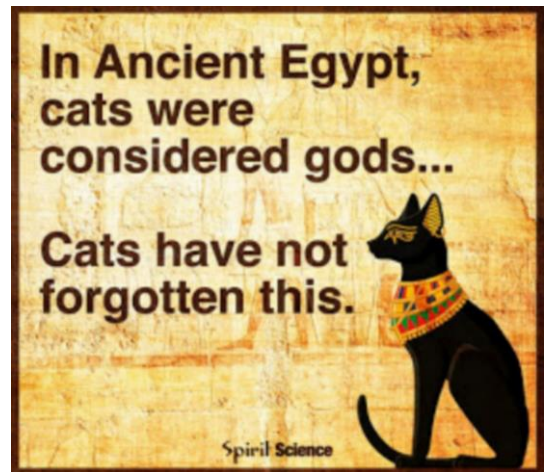
CANDLES:

The Superstition:

Actors usually dislike three candles on the stage or in a dressing room.

Origin:

Costumes and fresh paint are quick to catch fire. But there may be another, stranger origin for this superstition. There is a very old superstition stating that three, and only three candles, are lit in a room, the one closest to the shortest candle will be the first to either marry or die. To some, either is as hazardous.



if

CATS

The Superstition:

Actors say it is a very bad omen to kick a cat. It is lucky, however, to have one in the theatre, but if one runs across the stage during a performance, some misfortune will follow.

Origin:

Cats have always been considered to contain magical powers. This superstition dates all the way back to ancient Egyptians, who considered them Gods. Later they were said to contain the soul of a vampire or to have been used as the symbol for a witch.

COLOURS:

The Superstition:

Blue is an unlucky color for an actor to wear the world over, silver being it's only saving relief. Certain shades of yellow, also, are considered unlucky, particularly in a tie, a vest, or a hat. It is believed to be disastrous to allow a yellow clarinet in the orchestra.

Origin:

In the early days of theatre, blue was an extremely difficult dye color to create, and therefore was very expensive. Any theatre company spending such extravagant amounts on costumes was sure to close without turning a profit. Unless, of course, they were wearing silver, which was an indicator that the entire company was being funded by a VERY wealthy source; wealthy enough to afford silver adornments.

Green and yellow, during the era of the morality plays, were often considered a symbol of the Devil. A devil in disguise might be identified by wearing a green or yellow tie, vest or hat. As for the yellow clarinet ... I'm open to suggestions!

CURTAIN:

The Superstition:

The looping of a drop curtain is the certain fore runner of evil and nearly every actor and manager believes it is bad luck to look at the audience from the wrong side of the curtain.

Origin:

An actor peeking through the curtain at the audience is likely to see friends, family or, worst of all, a media critic furiously writing a review. This is enough to make any actor nervous and nervousness leads to disastrous performances.

GHOST LIGHT:

The Superstition:

There is a superstition that if an emptied theatre is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. In other versions of the same superstition the ghosts of past performances return to the stage to live out their glory moments. To prevent this, a single light is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone.

Origin:

The origin of this superstition is rooted in both practicality and further superstition itself! The practicality, of course, is that people coming into a darkened theatre cannot see what delicate costumes, sharp and pointy props and dangerous set pieces have been left lying about, and a light is important to prevent injury, property damage or lawsuits.

The other reason lends itself to further superstition. A "dark" theatre is a theatre without a play. There is nothing more sad to a drama artist than an empty house and a stage with no play. Therefore, a light is left burning centre stage so that the theatre is never "dark". It is simply awaiting the next production.

KNITTING:

The Superstition:

Knitting on the side of the stage or on stage by an actor or actress is regarded as unlucky.

Origin:

Knitting needles are pointy and can rip costumes rushing by to make an entrance. Also, a knitting needle on the floor may roll under the foot of a stagehand or actor, causing them to fall.

MAKEUP:

The Superstition:

The upsetting of a makeup box is the certain fore runner of evil. It is unlucky to carry a makeup box, like an amateur actress. The make up with a new set of grease paints on an opening night is unlucky. Makeup boxes should never be 'cleaned out', as this is said to bring bad luck. Powder, if dropped, should be danced upon to bring luck.

Origin:

All kinds of nasty stuff can get into makeup that's been on the floor. Actors and actresses who seem to be amateurs are less likely to be taken seriously and are in great danger of not being offered a contract. New and untested makeup on an opening night can be disastrous. You can never be certain of the quality of grease paint or how it's going to react under the hot lights. The minute you throw away something in your makeup box, you will need it. Powder should be danced on? I have no idea why!

MIRRORS:

The Superstition:

It is very unlucky to use real mirrors on stage. An actor, also, should not look into a mirror over the shoulder of another, so that the two reflections are seen together. Doing this will bring certain misfortune to the one overlooked. It is also considered unlucky to wear real jewelry on, or back stage.

Origin:

Real mirrors on a stage have a tendency to play havoc with a lighting design, reflecting rectangles of light into places never intended to be lit. Also, actors tend to be vain, and a mirror is simply an unnecessary distraction. Real jewelry, also, reflects the lights in obscure and unwanted ways. Also, jewelry is often lost on or back stage.

PEACOCK FEATHERS:

The Superstition:

Actors strongly dislike peacock feathers on the stage or in any part of the theatre.

Origin:

The most probable reason for this superstition is that the ever open 'eyes' on the feathers, have become associated with the Evil Eye, a portent of horrible misfortune, including death.

PINCH FOR LUCK:

The Superstition:

Before making a first entrance, an actor or actress should be pinched for luck

Origin:

It is an Old Wives' Tale that a pinch brings good luck. Maybe because it is proof that you're not dreaming . . . or dead.

STUMBLING IN:

The Superstition:

In the English theatres, to trip on entering the scene on the first night of a play is a sure sign of success. Also, if an actress trips over the hem of her dress, she should pick it up and kiss it. This, it is said, will bring a contract for the actress.

Origin:

Actresses should kiss the hems of their dresses after tripping on their first entrance in order to placate the fairies who tripped them up. (I didn't promise all these origins wouldn't be tied to superstitions all their own.)

THREAD:

The Superstition:

When finding a thread on another actor, one should wind it around a finger without breaking. This, it is said, will bring a contract from the management bearing the initial suggested by the number of times the thread goes around the finger.

Origin:

Again, I have no idea. Though, there are many superstitions involving tying thread around a finger.

THROWING COAL FOR LUCK:

The Superstition:

To ensure a successful career for a new theatre, you must stand on the stage and throw a piece of coal into the gallery.

Origin:

A lot of superstitions are associated with the use of coal. All I can guess is that this is an old superstition from the days when coal was used for heat and light, both essential in winter months.

WHISTLING:

The Superstition:

Whistling is expressly prohibited in the theatre, pertaining to all parts of the building, particularly the dressing rooms, where it is said that if heard, someone (not necessarily the whistler) will soon be out of work.

Origin:

The reason for this superstition is as follows: before the advent of Walkie talkies or clear coms, cues for theatre technicians were called with a sailor's whistle. Therefore, one who whistles in a theatre may, inadvertently, call a cue before it's time, setting all types of catastrophe into motion.

WISHING AN ACTOR "GOOD LUCK":

The Superstition:

It is considered very bad luck to wish an actor (or director, or playwright) "Good Luck" before an performance. Instead, you should say to him or her "Break A Leg".

Origin:

Wishing anyone, particularly an actor, "Good Luck" is apt to fill them with Confidence, feeling as though they have "luck" on their side. Confidence in an actor, can quickly lead to catastrophe, as it causes them to lose focus.

"Break A Leg" is a very old military term for "taking a knee", or bending down to one knee and breaking the line of the leg. In the theatre it is a reference to "taking a bow". To wish someone to "Break A Leg" is to ask them to give the best performance they are capable so that they may deserve to take a bow at performance end or, to "Break A Leg".

Another reference to "break a leg" is to slightly bending one's knees. Nervousness and adrenaline can make an actor "lock" their knees, which makes them look stiff on stage and can lead to feelings of illness under the hot lights and even cause them to pass out. Therefore, to "break a leg" can also be applied as a reminder to relax, loosen up, and enjoy giving the performance.

UNLUCKY TUNES:

The Superstition:

Certain tunes are considered unlucky in the theatre, especially: "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls" or "the dead march". Also, "three blind mice" is considered extremely unlucky.

Origin:

Clueless! Aren't some of these superstitions just plain strange?!!

THE GREEN ROOM:

"I know London. . . ay, and the Green Room, and all the Girls and Women there."
Collie Cibber, *Love Makes a Man* (1700)

The Superstition:

Mostly legend, The Green Room for centuries (the first reference to it seems to be in a play by Thomas Shadwell called *A True Widow*, 1679) has been an inherent part of theatrical architecture. We know what it is, a cozy backstage room for actors to assemble when they are not on stage, logically near the dressing rooms with quick access to the stage.

To help actors catch their cues for their entrances, in the Green Room are monitors that broadcast the play's action and, often, the audience responses.

The Green Room also is the place where audience members come after a production to embrace the cast.

Theatrical lore insists that the Green Room must be a nice, attractive room, after all, it is special, the theatre's "living room," a show place, a gathering place for actors, and the only backstage space to which audiences are invited-and that everyone must take pride in keeping it neat. Woe to the person who clutters it, demonstrating a selfish self-centered arrogance that shows no respect for the theatre, its traditions, or its actors!

On opening night, quite often the Green Room is creatively decorated with images of the play in progress, flowers, festive streamers and banners, keepsake gifts from each actor to each actor, and supportive cards and telegrams. The decorations give the room a festive quality, celebrating "another opening, another show," as the Cole Porter song from *Kiss Me Kate* says.

But while we know what it is, we don't know why it is green. Why not blue or red or some other color? Pure and simple, we just don't know.

Because we don't know, there are a lot of different stories. One common theory is that the color green is soothing to eyes that have been exposed to intense stage lighting, but that theory falls apart when we remember that Green Rooms existed when theatres were lit by candles, which, were hardly intense.

Another theory has it that in the Sixteenth Century, actors wore green to show their occupation or, perhaps, their allegiance to their particular patron, but that's pretty shaky and mostly untrue.

Some people point out that early theatre was presented in the town's centre "on the green" but how that creates the place called the Green Room is too much of a stretch for me to accept. Sometimes you'll hear that the room is green because it is a soothing color, but this concept is based on Twentieth century psychological theory.

Another reason is that it is called green because actors would be paid in this room but the Green Room started in England, and English money isn't green like US currency. Besides, in the 1700s they would most likely be paid in coins, not notes.

None of those theories seems to hold water. Pure and simple, we just don't know. We can say, safely, "Hey, it is called The Green Room 'because it is painted green" *s*.

Whatever the reason for its color, the Green Room is a firm part of theatrical lore. It has been a fixture in theatre for centuries. It also has spilled over to television. Guests waiting to go on camera will wait in The Green Room.

The "Green Room"?

Bill Watkins offers a new possible source of "Green Room." He points out that there are "hundreds of Gaelic words in English, like whiskey, galore, farmer, drover, pony," and that "golf being a Scottish game it has the Gaelic terms caddy, divot, and fore!" He therefore offers "Grain Room," from Gaelic, "grain" meaning "sunlit," and says "greenhouse" comes from that root as it is a sun house ("Tight a Grain"). "In many of the theatres I have worked, the Green Room was the one room with windows, so maybe." A visit to [Watkins's site](#) shows his books indicating that he is involved with Gaelic lore.

OUR TWO THEATRICAL SAINTS: Theatre has two patron saints, both martyrs from the third century, who are invoked to protect actors from disaster.

ST: GENESIUS

St. GENESIUS, according to legend, was a comedian who converted to Christianity. While performing a farcical version of Christian baptism on stage for the Emperor Diocletian (Roman Emperor and persecutor of the Church, born 245, died 313), suddenly had a revelation and refused to continue to make fun of Christianity. Diocletian was outraged and ordered the actor's death. He was tortured, torn with hooks, beheaded, and burned on stage. (He is also described as patron saint of lawyers, printers, and secretaries.) His feast day is August 25.

ST. VITUS:

The story of the second theatrical patron saint is also ascribed to legend. St. Vitus exorcised Emperor Diocletian's son of evil spirits that caused him to twitch uncontrollably. (We now know that is caused by chorea, a temporary disorder of those parts of the brain that control movements and coordination and causing continuous, involuntary jerking movements now called "St. Vitus dance" and known also as Sydenham's Chorea and Rheumatic Chorea.)

Despite the service to his son, the emperor was outraged that Vitus pronounced his belief in Christianity, accused him of sorcery, and placed him in a vat of boiling water. Vitus emerged unharmed, and an angel helped him escape Rome. The beautiful St. Vitus's Cathedral is the largest and the most important church in Prague. (He is also the patron saint of comedians and dancers, and he is invoked against epilepsy.) His feast day is June 15.