



# BOOZING WITH THE BARD

What happens when whiskey meets tragedy extemporaneously? The Off-Broadway smash, *The Drunk Shakespeare Society*.

**IN MACBETH**, William Shakespeare wrote, “Drink, sir, is a great provoker.” To any stage actor Shakespeare is gospel, but this quote is being taken quite seriously – or rather not so seriously – by cutting-edge New York theatre group, *The Drunk Shakespeare Society*.

In what’s described as a riotous mix of high art and low comedy, these thespians perform Macbeth on a nightly basis to an intimate audience. The unique difference to traditional interpretations is that one of the actors has five shots of whiskey in the first act!

What occurs from that point forward is hilariously unorthodox, even eccentric, but perhaps embodies the quirky spirit of ye olde English theatre. Says one of the troupe, “Acting while drunk is like being told that you have keys to all the cages at the zoo.

It is utterly exhilarating but sometimes very scary... and you want to make sure you let out the right animals.” The improvisation created by these actors often involves references to modern pop culture, and also invites a fun interaction with the audience. Actors have been known to speak as Yoda, strip their clothes off, even poke fun at Justin Bieber, but they still retain the plot – and their Shakespearean craft.

After getting the idea from the popular *Shitfaced Shakespeare* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Aussie producer Scott Griffin took the concept to the Three Day Hangover Company in New York City. Together with director David Hudson, they auditioned 1,300 actors for the ten roles. With two rotating casts performing on alternate nights, up to 50 percent of

the performance can end up improvised.

Audience members can get in on the act by paying extra to play a king or a queen. These roles come with the royal treatment of champagne, caviar, chocolates, cocktails and a crown, plus decision-making powers such as executions and pardons.

While some reviews call it juvenile humour, others have said *The Drunk Shakespeare Society* is the best Off-Broadway show they have ever seen and the highlight

of their visit to the Big Apple. The point is to enter with an open mind and perhaps have a drink or two yourself. Mind you, many non-drinkers have also given it the thumbs up. It should be noted that the society itself does not condone excessive drinking, with the actors carefully monitored and alternated. By their own admission they are a “drinking club with a Shakespeare problem”.

One can only wonder what Sir Laurence Olivier would have made of this, although we imagine Richard Burton would’ve approved as he often performed sozzled anyway. But what of The Bard himself? One can only hope he’d raise an ale and be inspired to write a brand new play!

**MORE:** *The Drunk Shakespeare Society* plays at *The Lounge* at Roy Arias Stages, 300 West 43rd Street, NYC. Visit: [www.drunkshakespeare.com](http://www.drunkshakespeare.com)

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