



â??Bitter Lemonâ??: Welcome to Hell, Macbeth!

## Description

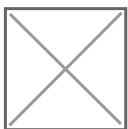
**SALT LAKE CITY**â??If there is one character in â??**The Scottish Play**â?• (aka *Macbeth*) that is particularly screwed over, it is Macduff who serves Macbeth only to have his wife and son killed by the titular character. Ultimately, Macduff gets vengeance by ending Macbethâ??s life, but what about Lady Macduff? Well, Playwright **Melissa Leilani Larson** wanted to settle the score, so she wrote *Bitter Lemon* to let Lady Macduff have her final say.



According to **Plan-B Theatre**, *Bitter Lemon* was initially commissioned by **Creekside Theatre Fest**, where it was performed as an in-hand script with a new cast every night. This fully realized production at **Plan-B Theatre** is the 2.0 version, complete with a sound score, a stellar cast, and an amazing production team. They are calling *Bitter Lemon* a (sort of) **World Premiere**, and it is running until the end of April at the Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. Larson is a well-loved local playwright from Hawaiâ??i with an MA in English, MFA, and several popular productions.

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*Bitter Lemon* delves into the compelling question: What if Lady Macduff finally had her say beyond her 19 lines in *The Scottish Play*? The play opens in a liminal space after death, where Lady Helen Macduff (played by **Yolanda Stange**) encounters her enemy, Finlay Macbeth (portrayed by **Bobby Cody**). As Macbeth's memories slowly come into focus, he attempts to engage with Lady Macduff. However, she is filled with anger towards Macbeth for the murder of herself and her children, and she has no hesitation in expressing her fury. Throughout the play, they engage in a tense back-and-forth dialogue, exploring the existential void they find themselves in and grappling with their past and what comes next.



Larson takes liberties with Shakespeare's script, adding depth and nuance to the female characters in the *Macbeth* origin story. Larson gives Shakespeare's female characters first names: Helen Macduff and Marion Macbeth. The audience learns that Lady Macduff and Lord Macbeth had a romantic past before Marion, adding drama and layers to an already tense situation.

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~Rhetorical Review~

At times, this play felt reminiscent of esteemed writer and Nobel-award recipient **Toni Morrison**'s *Desdemona*—a piece I hold with great regard—both take place in the afterlife and give a platform to minimized characters of Shakespeare's plays. In *Desdemona*, Morrison re-writes *Othello* to feature Desdemona's African nurse, **Barbary**, and an intimate dialogue of words and music ensues. Both Morrison and Larson add depth to the female characters in Shakespeare's plays, letting them not only speak but with gusto. In *Desdemona*, the characters also sing. Desdemona is an extraordinary narrative of words, music, and song about Shakespeare's doomed heroine, who speaks from the grave about the traumas of race, class, gender, war—and the transformative power of love. While Larson's script does not deal with issues of race, I could easily see this modern adaptation incorporating these elements into a future rewrite to add depth to an already compelling play.

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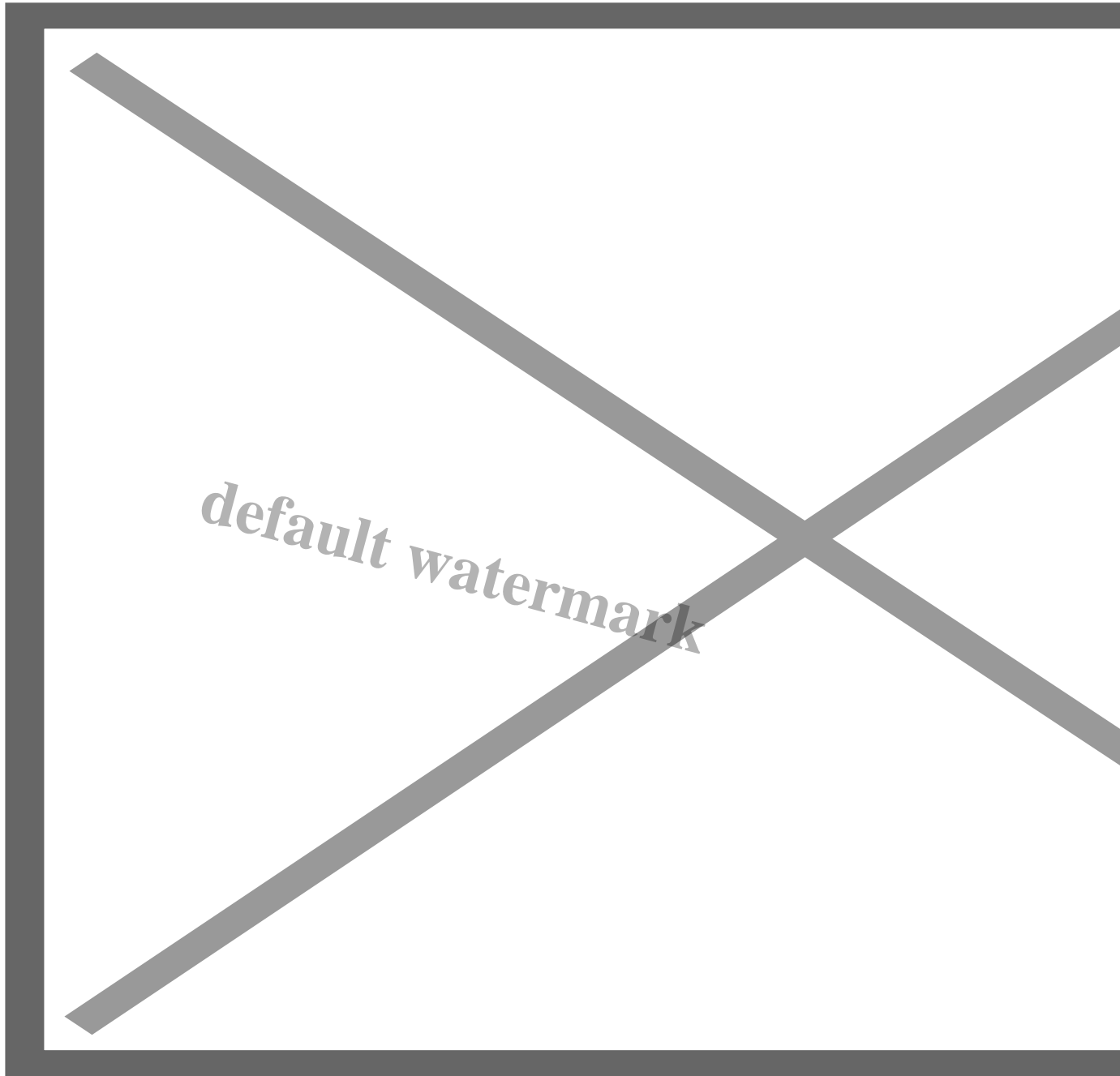


Photo credit: Sarah Meservy

**Yolanda Stange** embodies Lady Macduff with a powerful presence that demands attention. Infused with anger and bitterness, Stange portrays the character’s grief with a sense of futility, emphasizing that revenge holds little solace in the afterlife. Despite the turmoil, Stange delivers her lines with authority. Even when confronted by Macbeth’s provocations, Stange infuses Lady Macduff with unwavering resolve and determination, garnering strong support from the audience. As Finlay Macbeth, **Bobby Cody** contrasts Stange’s intensity with a charismatic pretense and, at times, vain attempts to win Lady Macduff over. Persistent in his questioning and scheming, Cody’s portrayal of Macbeth exudes rehearsed bravado that gradually crumbles throughout the play, revealing the person Macbeth could have been under different circumstances. Together, Cody and Stange create a captivating

dynamic with electric chemistry that leaves the audience entranced and pondering the unreachable resolution.

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*~Rhetorical Review~*

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Upon entering the theater, **Janice Chan**'s scenic design, expertly crafted by **David Knoell**, immediately captivates the audience's gaze. The reflective mylar on the floor interacts with **Emma Belnap**'s lighting design, casting ethereal reflections onto crinkled backdrop panels and creating an otherworldly ambiance. Minimalist blocks are scattered throughout the space, serving as stools and enhancing the surreal atmosphere. **Victoria Bird**'s costume design skillfully integrates elements of the surrounding structure, color, and texture to capture their respective characters. Bird's costume design effectively brings these characters into the 21st century while embodying the status of Macbeth and Lady Macduff. However, I missed the play's Scottish influence, and I wish the play had somehow referenced the Scottish origin of *Macbeth* in either costume or set.

**Cheryl Ann Cluff**'s sound design is so interesting. It adds to the unease of the setting, seamlessly complementing the actors' tension with its subtle yet impactful presence. I noticed sometimes the music tones and lighting change as the characters' moods do; really clever and thoughtful details under **Jerry Rapier**'s direction. According to Rapier, Cheryl created the sound assign: it's the actors humming "uhhhhhhhh" at different pitches that she then manipulated. All of these details—the sounds, lights, and colors—come together to form a striking piece of art that resonates long after the curtain falls.

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Jerry Rapier is the director of *Bitter Lemon* and has served as Plan-B's Artistic Director since 2000. He is the first person of color to lead a professional arts organization in Utah history. He has directed nearly 40 productions for the company, including Mel's plays PILOT PROGRAM and *Metiza, or Mixed*.

*Bitter Lemon* deals with themes of loss, regret, friendship, and forgiveness. One of the lines that stuck out to me the most was Macbeth saying, "We've been trying to put a finger on the reason why we're both here [Hell]. What if the reason is that we think we can't change? What if the only way out is to change?" Lady Macduff replies, "What if the only way to joy is to take a risk." It reminded me that everything we do in life is a choice. Although circumstances are not always a choice, our reactions to even the worst circumstances are always a choice; joy or misery is a choice. Perhaps Lady Macduff and Macbeth were stuck in purgatory arguing because they weren't ready to forgive, or perhaps they were there because Macbeth was a tool. We will never know.



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I hope people will think about these iconic people as a little more ordinary—regular people asking questions we all find ourselves asking.

Melissa Leilani Larson

From the playbill

- Plan-B Theatre presents *Bitter Lemon* by Melissa Leilani Larson.
- **Directed by Jerry Rapier**
- **Stage managed by Taylor Wallace**
- **Sound Design: Cheryl Ann Cluff**
- **Lighting Design: Emma Belnap**
- **Scenic Design: Janice Chan**
- **Intimacy Direction: Liz Whittaker**
- **Costume Design: Victoria Bird**
- **Scenic build and electrical work: David Knoell**

**APRIL 11-14, 2024**  
**IN THE STUDIO THEATRE**

**THURSDAYS @ 8 PM**

**FRIDAYS @ 8 PM**

**SATURDAYS @ 4 PM (ASL APRIL 13, SENSORY-FRIENDLY APRIL 20)**

**SUNDAYS @ 2 PM**

- The Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center: 138 W Broadway, Salt Lake City UT 84101
- Tickets: \$15-25
- Address: **138 W Broadway, Salt Lake City, UT, United States, Utah**

- Phone: (801) 297-4200
- 60 minutes, no intermission. No Late seating.
- Plan-B Theatre website: <https://planbtheatre.org>
- *Bitter Lemon* webpage: <https://my.artix.org/31643/31665>
- Plan-B Theatre Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/planbtheatreco>
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keola06

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