



Macbeth - The Guthrie's 50th

by Bruce Brandt. Written on 2010-04-26. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Macbeth* (2010, Guthrie Theater, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

THIS PRODUCTION OF *MACBETH* IS THE GUTHRIE'S 50TH SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTION. IT BEGAN not with the weird sisters speaking of the "hurlyburly," nor with King Duncan receiving reports from the battlefield, but with the battle itself. Soldiers burst onto the stage, some descending on ropes that dropped from the fly space; others charging in from stage left and right. The sound of explosions and gunfire filled the theater. As the fighting subsided, Duncan and his staff entered and he received the report from the wounded sergeant. From there the play proceeded at a rapid pace. Played without a break, the entire performance lasted just two hours and five minutes.

It was acted on the Guthrie's Wurtele Thrust Stage, and with the exception of a gold wall that descended for the scenes in the palace, the set remained constant throughout the performance. At the back of the stage was the façade of a heavily damaged neo-classical style building with huge columns, and around the sides of the stage lay damaged furniture and other household goods, presumably pulled or tossed from the building. Everything was gray. Presumably the building had been damaged or destroyed in the ongoing fighting that the kingdom had undergone. In the Guthrie's [online notes](#) for the performance, the set and costume designer, Monica Frawley, spoke of Hitler's and Mussolini's professed love of art (the neoclassical structure) and the destruction that they actually wrought on civilization. One doubts that such a specific association would have occurred to many in the audience without the prompting of her comment, but the set design was certainly effective in suggesting a depressed and damaged kingdom, one beset by war both at the beginning and end of the play, and one suffering under the rule of a tyrant.

The action was set in the mid-twentieth century, although Frawley's notes indicated that she had deliberately mixed costumes from different times during that period to give the play a more generic and timeless feeling. The costumes and props were both attractive and effective, although after the spectacular display of weaponry in the opening, it seemed odd for all of the

subsequent fighting to be done only with knives. Perhaps, though, most theatergoers would not notice, and as Horatio tells Hamlet, “Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.”

The actors playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Erik Heger and Michelle O’Neill) are both physically attractive, and the production emphasizes the Macbeths’ love, and lust, for each other. In their first scene together, Macbeth strips off his shirt immediately upon returning home, and the couple ends up embracing passionately on the floor. The play fully realizes the idea that Lady Macbeth’s sway over her husband is rooted in her sexuality.

A number of Joe Dowling’s directorial decisions were interesting. For example, after Ross tells Macduff that he will go to Scone to see the coronation, the scene shifts to Scone, and Macbeth’s coronation is staged with full pomp and ceremony. The production also offers a simple answer to the identity of the third murderer. The servant who brings in the two murderers is Seyton, and after the two are dismissed, Macbeth motions for Seyton to follow them. Strangely, though, Fleance escapes death precisely because Seyton, who could have easily killed him, lets him go. Though there is no textual warrant for this decision, it would appear that there are limits to what even the most loyal of servants will do. The special effects of the witches’ conjuring scene created a strikingly beautiful scene. The “cauldron” was an open trap, through which the apparitions appeared. The dry-ice fog machines created a thick layer of fog, perhaps eight-inches high, which flowed across the stage and poured into the open trap, like river water forming a waterfall. There was no beheading at the end. Malcolm enters immediately after Macduff has slain Macbeth, and Macduff’s line “Behold where stands / Th’usurper’s cursèd head” is spoken while pointing to the body.

Clearly there was much that worked well in this performance of *Macbeth*, and much to think about. However, speaking as one who has seen almost all of the Guthrie’s Shakespeare productions for many years, and been enthralled by most of them, this production was disappointing. Much was simply too static. Despite the beauty of the cauldron scene’s staging, the witches themselves were not dynamic. One suspects that this fault came from the director’s desire to emphasize the ritualistic side of magic, but the result was slow and mechanical. They did not produce the aura of equivocating evil that is required of them. Similarly, the doctor should have been much more fearful for her own life once she (in this production) has pierced the secret of Lady Macbeth’s madness. She was too low key. She needs to hide her fear from Macbeth, but not from the audience. Surprisingly for the Guthrie, language sometimes seemed a stumblingly block. Particularly with the younger actors, there was a tendency to overemphasize the cadence of the blank verse. Macbeth’s later soliloquies also had a tendency to be spoken as ruminative and slow, rather than as filled with powerful emotion. Again, one suspects that directorial vision underlay the actor’s approach.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Macbeth
<i>Year</i>	2010
<i>Theater Company</i>	Guthrie Theatre
<i>Theaters</i>	Wurtele Thrust Stage (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2010-01-30
<i>End Date</i>	2010-04-03

Cast

MACBETH	ERIK HEGER
LADY MACBETH	MICHELLE O'NEILL
DUNCAN	RAYE BIRK
MALCOLM	JOHN SKELLEY
DONALBAIN/SERVANT	BENJAMIN ROSENBAUM
BANQUO	BILL MCCALLUM
MACDUFF	ROBERT O. BERDAHL
LADY MACDUFF	SUN MEE CHOMET
LENOX	J. C. CUTLER
ROSSE	BOB DAVIS
MENTETH	PETER CHRISTIAN HANSEN
ANGUS	JAMES NOAH
FORBES	TYSON FORBES
FLEANCE	NICHOLAS SAXTON
FLEANCE	GRAHAM ZIMA
WEIRD SISTER	BARBARA BRYNE
WEIRD SISTER/DOCTOR	ISABELL MONK
WEIRD SISTER/GENTLEWOMAN	SUZANNE WARMANEN
SERGEANT/SEYTON	SAM BARDWELL
MACDUFF'S SON	NOAH COON
MACDUFF'S SON	CHARLIE LINCOLN
PORTER	KRIS L. NELSON
MACDUFF'S DAUGHTER	ELIZABETH MCCORMICK
MACDUFF'S DAUGHTER	NINA MOSCHKAU

Creatives

DIRECTOR	JOE DOWLING
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	ANNELISE CHRIST
DRAMATURG	CARLA STEEN
COSTUME DESIGNER	MONICA FRAWLEY
SET DESIGN	MONICA FRAWLEY
LIGHTING DESIGNER	FRANCES ARONSON
COMPOSER	SCOTT W. EDWARDS
COMPOSER	ADAM WERNICK
MOVEMENT	MARCELA LORCA
FIGHT DIRECTOR	JOHN STEAD
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	RUSSELL W. JOHNSON
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	CHRIS A. CODE
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	MICHELE HARMS
VOICE AND LANGUAGE CONSULTANT	ANDREW WADE