



## A Bloody and Bloodless Macbeth at Chicago Shakespeare

by James Mardock. Written on 2009-05-19. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Macbeth* (2009, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, USA).

BARBARA GAINES'S PRODUCTION OF *MACBETH* THIS SPRING AT THE CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE Theater was characterized by the company's perennial strengths and weaknesses. It's been years since the move to their home on Navy Pier from the versatile if modest Ruth Page Theater, and occupying one of the Midwest's most fabulous theater spaces has always encouraged Chicago Shakes to pull out all the technical stops. Sound and lighting effects are always top-notch on Navy Pier, and the company relies on the space's nearly unmatched capabilities for effects and spectacle to draw their crowds: "7000 gallons of water onstage!" shouted the advertisement for this summer's *Twelfth Night*. But ultimately, set design is ultimately no replacement for solid textual work and vocal mastery, and too often, as with this *Macbeth*, it seems that design concerns overwhelm all others.

This production, which might go down in memory as the "J-Horror *Macbeth*," was certainly a titillator. It featured helicopter-swept battlefields, the gore-dripping bodies of the Macduffs in the flies, a holographic projection of Banquo's gory locks, and a *Death of Marat* tableau of the queen's nude corpse in a blood-filled plexiglass bathtub. The witches materialized out of the ranks of embedded journalists and on the stage of a strip club. Big Brother video screens magnified each stage of Macbeth's giddy ascent to power into grotesquerie, the modern, wired version of the dwarf in a giant's stolen robes.

Despite one of the consistently best supporting casts in any production I have seen, however, the two lead performances, with Jeff-award-winning Ben Carlson as Macbeth and Karen Aldridge as Lady Macbeth, were curiously bloodless. Both actors frequently imposed Method-style emotional readings bluntly onto their performances, rather than trusting the verse to work for them. At times, especially in their scenes together, they seemed overdirected, and strove too much to produce sexual chemistry at odds with the logic of the scenes. For example, although the frequently-nude Lady M knelt (topless) in a very fancy circle of smoke to invoke the spirits to unsex her, the ensuing scene demonstrated the extent to which those spirits had failed. This was a woman clearly using her overpowering sex appeal to drive her husband to murder, but the

weight of her argument was utterly buried under the distractions of groping and straddling. I found it hard to believe that any of her words could penetrate the libidinous haze to Macbeth's ears.

Not that this Macbeth needed much prodding. In their attempt to make the production Relevant and Modern, the company set it in a violently dystopian present that implicated every character as a war criminal, making Macbeth's fall from noble war hero to "a murderer with the soul of a poet" a non-issue. Our first glimpse of the Thane of Glamis's moral character came not bathed in the glow of the Sergeant's report to Duncan (David Lively), but in the quagmire of modern warfare. The production opened with a dumb show depicting the traitor Macdonwald and his men pinned down by machine gun fire. As Macdonwald, the lone survivor amid a field of corpses, stood on a darkened stage, a laser sight picked out a killing shot on his head, then sadistically travelled to find his knee. With his legs shot out from under him, Macdonwald panted, helpless and supine, as Macbeth approached, unseamed the helpless traitor from the navel to the chops with a bowie knife, spat on him and posed with his corpse for the cameras. The effect was gripping, to be sure, but watching the man who will be King Macbeth dispatch a helpless, barely conscious old man with a dagger made it impossible to believe his later hesitation in the face of doing the same to Duncan.

I mentioned the superior quality of the supporting cast; the Macduffs were particular standouts. The scene of painfully intimate domesticity between the very pregnant Lady Macduff (the excellent Rengin Altay) and her children, as the certainty of their abandonment to slaughter bears down on them, was heartwrenching, and the fourth-act revelation of their murder to Macduff – a notoriously difficult scene for an actor to execute – worked magnificently, as the superb Evan Buliung played it as simply as possible. Watching Macduff feeling his grief like a man, like watching the easy intimacy between Banquo and Fleance, drove home the extent to which this is a domestic tragedy as much as it is a political one. Macbeth's demonic ambition destroys Scotland, perverts nature, and murders sleep, but the most devastating effect is the annihilation of familial love. Had it pursued that theme as it related to the play's central family as well, this production would have transcended the collection of stage effects that ultimately overwhelmed it.