



Macbeth: Witches Brew

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For the production: Steampunk Macbeth (2013, Hudson Shakespeare Company).

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES A THEATER COMPANY ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET FACES, IS THAT SOME troupe members have to play multiple supporting parts, which often draws undue attention away from the play. In their current rendition of *Macbeth*, which concludes their 2013 Summer Season, the Hudson Shakespeare Company, by reaching an astute – and as far as I know, original – revelation about the play, turn this problem of distraction into a strength.

Macbeth is not about Macbeth.

Macbeth is about the Witches.

Oh sure, the story still depicts the paranoiac rise and fall of the prototypical power couple, but it is the “three weird sisters” who set in motion the action, all of the action.

In the original text, the sisters only make a handful appearances, this production they visibly permeate the telling of the tale, forcing us to re-examine our own perspectives on this play, and our assumptions about what exactly occurs on stage. The witches are everywhere.

Our wet midsummer has made this a gazebo tour for the Hudson Shakespeare Company. Like *Henry VIII* last month, the rainy Friday forced the production from the spacious sprawl of the lawn and onto cramped stage of the gazebo. A larger crowd than Henry braved the stormy weather. This nefarious classic can still draw the crowds, plus this highly entertaining production also kept the audience entranced. Very few left early. The intimacy of Van Vorst Park’s Gazebo Theater actually enhanced the going-ons of the Scottish play, which a story of the interior, and filled with some of the earliest elements of stream of consciousness found in the Western Canon. The presentation already off-kilter and unnerving, are qualities that benefitted by the in-your-face closeness to the evening’s action that can only be found in Gazebo Theatre.

The Van Vorst Macbeth realizes that this play is not primarily about the noirish descent into murder or the struggle to regain order after a reign of royal-cide. No. *Macbeth* is about the

Witches, those sorceresses and soothsayers. They represent fate – a fate who laughs at her own cruelty – and they screech reminders that fate is inescapable, free choice is folly.

Noelle Fair, director of this production, expands what is hiding in plain sight – that *Macbeth* is about that trio. What may seem like a re-imaging of *Macbeth*, may actually bring the play back to roots.

The Witches – Lisa LaGrande, Siobahn O’Loughlin, Emily Dalton – appear first and are encouraged to hijack the play. An amusingly unsettling production, this *Macbeth* is totally Goth. Harold Bloom (my guru of Bardalotry) praises the play’s brutal economy, pointing out that the play is Shakespeare’s shortest, half the length of *Hamlet*. The play is streamlined by some sure-footed editing – for instance, the character of Hecate, queen of the witches, is removed, consolidating her lines by giving them to the witches, whose moves are as synchronized as they are ritualistic. The selective condensing quickened the momentum, always a plus in outdoor Shakespeare presentations.

The design is described as a “steam punk” version, which is the melding of contemporary urban with a Victorian romanticism, especially in the costuming. A vintage clothing store exploded in the wardrobe department – Leather vests, lace, boots and spats – a sleek yet motley look, perfect for this trippy, pedal-to-the-medal ride through hell. The music was harsh, horror techno (augmented with the occasional drone of a Van Vorst cicada), chock-a-block with sound effects and blistering synthesizer riffs. Jonathan Sherrill was responsible for this hypnotic, aural freak-out. It was impressively strange, sometimes sinister relentless and ultra-euro. It reminded me of 70s giallo soundtrack, but faster, noisier and moments seemed like Peter Gabriel was sitting in on some of the tracks. The electronica pumped up the volume, accelerated the action, and brazenly indulged the Goth

From the moment the three witches appear, coming from different directions and doing a pastiche of dance moves – ballet, modern, St. Vitus – you enter their feverish, sultry world. The three voluptuous women are always in same wardrobe, even when playing other, supporting plots. One is wearing a corset, another a Bergere Folly dancing girl dress – bustle in the back, dress cut high on the thigh in front. All are scandalously low-cut, verging on nip-slip. Their stockings are fishnet and they were way too much eye shadow. These broads are bawdy, and hot, not the prototypical crones usually associated with the Three Weird Sisters. We expect evil to be old and ugly. It’s a subversive directorial decision to mask those fears in such giddy sensuality. The witches are projections of our deepest apprehensions – what is deeper than overt sexuality? What better camouflage for our dark impulses than the most skin deep beauty?

Even though in the text, the witches only appear in a handful of scenes, the entire play – the decline of the Macbeths – is really a portrayal of their augury and incantations. They appear not just in the toil & trouble trio scenes of the scenes, but also taking up many of the extraneous supporting roles or, in even more innovative stage direction, as apparitional extensions of the power couple's psyche. They are sheer fun to watch, and as audience members, by wondering constantly wondering why are they here, we get pushed back closer to the nightmare that is *Macbeth*. We feel like we get used to them, but they keep surprising us. They are an ensemble unto themselves. By the time we get to their famous cauldron scene – here represented by a round circle of velvet rope into which various colored silk scarves are flung – their chorus of blood-curdling cackles were echoing in the park. It was a total, spine-tingling freak show. The only ones who have any fun are those free from fate.

Lady Macbeth (Rachel Alt) is introduced in the first act, reading a letter from her husband, which tells her about the three witches predictions. The three witches dancing around her, gesture towards her. They are seen only by the audience, When Lady Macbeth reads from the letter their quotes, and they echo the lines with the Lady, an incredibly eerie touch.

Later, in Lady Macbeth's best soliloquy, the "out damn spot" scene where a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth is plagued by guilt, the actresses, still in the witch garb, actually play the minor roles of "gentle woman" in this scene. Inescapable fate even embodies the new queen's retinue.

Alt shows us the descent of this woman – who realizes she must "Make thick my blood" when she first is introduced – making the fatal decision to enable assassination to gain power – to finally devolving into the damaged, hallucinating woman who cannot bear the guilt. When she performed these two crucial soliloquies that sort of bookend the play, she convinces us of the transformation in character contained in each. I was reminded of a jazz solo, but if you listen to a horn soar, the drummer (sometimes the bass and other instruments too) continue the tempo. They sustain the beat, so the horn or whatever instrument can excel in the spotlight. Solo does not necessarily mean alone. Placing the witches throughput, keeping the threesome constantly in the background, energized the other actors.

Macbeth was played by David C. Neal, as a little bumbling. He commits the crime and the cover-up by his wife's urging, often with innuendo about his manhood – "screw your courage to the sticking place" – but he exudes the quality of a good man who did a bad thing. His is an everyman Macbeth.

In *The Invention of the Human* and his famous Macbeth portion of his lecture series on 7 Shakespeare Tragedies, Bloom is fond of pointing out that the Macbeth marriage is the happiest of all the marriages in Shakespeare. They do love each other, and there was a credible

chemistry between the two, and Alt did not play Lady Macbeth as a harridan – she coaxes and perhaps cajoles but she doesn't drive her husband to bloody murder. The cracks about his manhood never sound like taunts, just the banter of a married couple.

And once the king is killed, they both share the guilt – exemplified by another brilliant bit of business – they both wear red gloves – there is a palpable feeling they are in this together. Funny, about the Macbeths, they regret their actions – the guilt is so severe they hallucinate (where the witches, occasional ghost and dance of dagger, here also performed by the three siblings of course) – but at least they have each other. Alt and Neal seem to underscore the companionship of each other they willingly give and crave.

In this production, Duncan (Bradley Summner) in his scene with Lady Macbeth, when he invites himself to stay in their castle (a big mistake), he comes off as sexually harassing her, a surprising hostility towards the woman the house and one, in deference to his highness, she must ignore this disrespect without comment. The Macbeths do not just want to use the Witches prediction to their own advantage, they are a childless couple – Lady Macbeth makes reference to her the children she lost “I have given suck, and know how tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me” – now, the Witches predict that offspring will take over and the Macbeths do kill some offspring, but the fact is, they are aware that they will be denied the throne – and any real standing in the court – because they are a middle aged, childless couple. They offer no lineage, no continuity – kingdom and the order of the universe require the future, not just the past, be present in the present. Banquo (Jon Ciccarelli), MacDuff (James Kirby), and Malcom (James Masciovecchio) – they are more desirable because they offer heirs to the throne – the hostility shown by Duncan towards Lady Macbeth implied this dismissing of her. Because they are portrayed as ordinary – not even high strung, except after of course they kill – their actions to them are now just about power, but justified as political survival. Although, when your career decisions are the same advice given to you by witches, you may want to rethink your strategy. Sumner acting decision to underscore the scene with disrespect brings out the political dilemma the Macbeths find themselves in – by being childless, the system sees them as expendable.

Neal did a fine ending soliloquy – one of the most poignant in all of Shakespeare (not counting Hamlet insists Harold) – when hearing of Lady Macbeth's death, he realizes the futility of life – “Out, Out brief candle, Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Hearing it again, you forget that this isn't just the passage where Faulkner copped the title of his great novel, but that this man has come to this state of pure grief out of love. Neal and Alt are a

credible couple, yuppies like you or me or anybody in your neighborhood, they just happened to have made a grave mistake, one they didn't realize until too late, ran counter to their values and perhaps, those values were easy to overlook because she had seen her baby die and he had a successful military career including combat experience. They were such a nice couple, normal, happy, quiet, always cut their castle's lawn. Given the same set of circumstances, we could be them. The simply felt cornered, made a desperate decision that proved to be a mistake – and then the one killing led to another, and another.

The steam punk scenario – ahistorical and fantastical, totally contrary to the *Macbeth* staging we are familiar with – actually accentuated the believable of the play, as well as the real reason *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's ever green tragedies – our identification. That is the secret to this play's appeal. We identify with Macbeth and his wife. When Neal gave the Faulkner title reading, we share his grief and his hatred of life. We know that losing a loved one can make you feel that life is entirely without meaning, that it "signifies nothing." We feel his despair – a man who has horrified us for the past hour or so receives our utmost empathy. It is this empathy, more than the action, that makes *Macbeth* so unnerving, Shakespeare's genius never fades.

Macbeth and his wife dominate this short play – Bloom says he says about 75 percent of the lines, second only to *Hamlet*, natch! – but that over-saturation was leavened by two scenes infused with some subtle business that enhance the production.

One was the famed porter scene – the only comic moment in the play, which is uncommon for Shakespeare – Scholars long have pointed out that the categories of tragedy and comedy are misleading since all the plays combine many components of both, although the former have more of the latter than vice versa. The porter scene occurs after Macbeth kills the king, the porter lets in MacDuff and Lennox (Emily Frail) to the castle, but he's drunk and apologizes by saying drink is the great provoker, and MacDuff, playing the straight man says, what does it provoke – "Nose-Painting, Sleep and Urine. Lechery Sir, it provokes and unprovokes; it provokes the desire but unprovokes the performance."

Now, this got a big laugh from the audience, and the delivery was very funny, with slurred words, spastic body language and lurching pauses. But in keeping with the limited cast, the Porter was played by Sumner, who was of course the King, seen murdered a few minutes before and seen as king only a little earlier. Disconcerting, but he added a meta touch – The porter wore a crown (meta squared, the same crown I believe the actor wore as *Henry VIII* in July) – which kept popping off his head – was he playing with the audience expectations, knowing they would recognize the same actor? Or was it a clever use of a prop, the crown being just a

character gimmick of the porter, something to jostle while inebriated, yet also signifying that the throne has been usurped, the kingdom is now in turmoil.

The murder, like a few other scenes, happens off-stage. But, in a tribute to 19th century shadow play, the action actually appeared behind a translucent white sheet, the action being enacted as shadows by the players behind the screen – and a bright light behind them, casting the shadow on the white sheet for the audience to see. The familiar arms of the witches holding daggers are visible in this shadow form and I seem to also recall the outline of a crown – it was a really neat effect, in keeping with the constant appearance of the witches. The shadows were projections of the minds of the Macbeths – just as the witches appear as projections of those same troubled minds. Banquo is the only one who saw the witches, yet he later appears an apparition. He becomes part of their preternatural, thus subconscious, realm.

Fair's direction makes you realize how utterly interior *Macbeth* is on page. The small touch with the shadow crown then the crown being fumbled by the Porter is another detail culminating into a richly internalized texture.

Now, the other scene that is counter to the Macbeths hogging of the action is the rather thankless scene where MacDuff and Malcom, exiled in England, muster the courage to return to Scotland and dethrone the murderous Macbeth. Now I say it is a thankless scene, meaning thankless for the actors, because its purpose is mainly expository. We find out about the ongoing war and it basically serves to get the rest of the cast back to Scotland for the final blood bath. The other thankless aspect of the scene is that while Malcolm and MacDuff are good, we love the Macbeths. They're fun – acting out our darkest impulses then suffering the guilt we know making those impulses come true would engender. Malcolm and MacDuff are not as likeable because they hate our flawed yet recognizable stand-in.

The two actors play a game of tennis in this scene, which brings the audience into the real time, facts on the ground story. At first Malcolm has had it and MacDuff implores him to return to Scotland. A messenger – Ross – Jeff Deglow – arrives with the news that MacDuff's castle has been taken and his wife and children have been slain by Macbeth's troops. In a slight change of text, after processing the news, the actor's voice crack and says "my beauties?" meaning his children. The audience, bewitched by the witches and their sympathizing with Macbeth's plight, is suddenly shoved back to the reality of this situation – murder is begetting murder and the more innocent you are the more likely you will die. Parallel to our own conflict of who now to root for though, is the tennis game between of motivation between the two actors, whose feelings are now reversed and its Malcolm who must rally the grief-stricken MacDuff to action: "Be this the whetstone of sword. Let Grief convert to anger. Blunt not your heart, enrage it!" The

witches are having all the fun and Macbeth is having all the glory but these actors successfully earn our righteous empathy, and ‘official’ support.

When the same two finally overcome Macbeth, beheading him – actually putting the mad soul out of misery, because once his Lady and accomplice had died, there was nothing left for him to live for – the audience is torn. We knew Macbeth must die, and Malcolm and MacDuff convinced of us their just cause, their need to avenge the original murder of the king – but we are totally unsettled. Was Macbeth right? Is life just sound and fury – nothing – without meaning? Macbeth’s final downfall – and by our understanding of his actions and the reasons for his actions we become implicated in those horrors, as much as an accomplice in thought if not deed as his wife – is not a conclusion that gives us peace. We are looking through a bloody mirror darkly. Guilt is reflected back.

But considering the larger context of this play – Scotland is victorious after a bloody war with the combined forces of Norway and Ireland. But in this world, this peace only means Scotland is now free to war among comrades. Those whose lived by the sword will die by the dagger. The war ends, the witches begin the nightmare. The resolution – decapitating a fellow member of the aristocracy – is as brutal – as any of the acts the violence intends to cease. The enemy is ultimately within.

Those cackling sirens of evil, those weird sisters – they are the cause of the nightmare – they are the nightmare – they might awaken the evil in Macbeth and his wife and in us – but they are the larger evil and was that evil any less brutal than the war in which the story begins and ends? Maybe the real collective us is not the power hungry couple backsliding into an amorality they cannot handle, but those purveyors of cruel fate, the witches.

In a phantasmagoria this comprehensive, that is the only solace we can find.

The Scene editors were unable to determine authorship of two reviews that appeared on the ISE Chronicle in 2013. We believe both of them to have been contributed by the same person. ISEC did allow for anonymous publication. If anyone knows the author of these two reviews, we would be happy to give credit where credit is due.