

Macbeth in the rain, first impressions

I saw *Macbeth* on August 4th, Tuesday night, its second performance. It was very impressive and most of what follows is praise; however, as is ever the way, I will probably spend more time on the one scene that I found not so successful. This is because you always want to explain fully why something did not grab you and give as rounded a view, taking in alternative viewpoints, as possible, so as not to be unfair. On the other hand when you are praising the director and actors for something you feel works, there's not necessarily the same need to go into quite so much detail. Hopefully, my one quibble does not imbalance the overall impression I'm trying to convey, which is highly positive.

I shall start, as the play does, with the witches. They are marvellous, consisting, as they do, of an interesting mixture: a little bit silly, a larger bit crazy and definitely disturbing. The good thing about this is that they definitely are 'the weird sisters'.

I like them that way while readily acknowledging they can be played in a myriad of styles. Here are some from other productions:



You might think the last set look rather dull but they are closer to what Shakespeare saw in Holinshed's *Chronicles* than the others.



Simon Bell's are not like any of these, the first photo comes the closest but not close at all. They are mesmerising. You should go and see them. *Macbeth*, like *Timon of Athens*, runs until the 29th of August.

Macbeth meeting the witches was excellently performed, a really good use of a sword, here, something which was to continue throughout the evening. Banquo bashing the sides of the construct the witches were in, with his sword, was arresting but the witches were not to be cowed by a mere 'middle earther'. There then followed a splendid moment when one of the sisters, launched herself onto Banquo with some force.

As for the more mortal cast, well, I seem to be saying all this season that it was 'a consistently overall strong cast performance' and I have to report that this was once again the case. I can assure you that I am not just repeating this claim for the sake of it, rather, it has felt that way almost throughout the 2015 season. 2014 had many fine things to commend it, but this year seems, generally speaking, to be a step up. It would be interesting to know if any actors or directors reading this feel the same from their side of things.

So, again, there were a host of strong performances. Duncan was superb; Alexander Gordon-Wood carries off the part of Duncan with consummate aplomb. Duncan was just as you'd expect the doomed king to be. The Macbeth couple (Harry Anton and Katherine Swan) interplay was very well done, their desire, love and mutual dependency clearly and believably portrayed. This was conveyed in a myriad of ways, some of which I remember clearly. Firstly, when Lady Macbeth was giving the following speech:

*Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'*

[Enter MACBETH]

*Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.*

When Macbeth, 'entered', he pressed his body onto hers from behind and snaked an arm forward to firmly grab her left breast. This set off the sexual chemistry between the two that is so clearly in the text. This was further heightened by a sexy kiss just before Lady Macbeth's harrowing speech was delivered, with its terrible lines:

*I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out,*

This she delivered while astride the prone Macbeth, pinning him in between her legs. There is a glorious moment as Lady Macbeth jumps on Macbeth and knocks him to the ground. Macbeth is no easy pushover, as is made very clear elsewhere in the performance.

Yet another good touch in their intimate relationship was Macbeth's hand on her womb as he declared:

*Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.*

Banquo was excellent but I have praised Max Sterne so much in the last couple of years that you must think he pays me, yet there is no getting away from it, he really was very good again; not least in the banquet scene which was remarkably well done, and was one of the highlights of the play. This had

clearly been thought out in detail and meticulously rehearsed; it was an impressive piece of stage management

Harry Anton's transformation of Macbeth as the play went on up to the part where he really feels himself invincible was captivating. Then slowly as his every surety is taken from him, he both diminishes and paradoxically is resurgent as the warrior who began the play, facing his end with defiance:

*Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back.*

One of the dominant images of the night was Harry Anton, white faced and bare upper body, powerfully declaiming from atop the podium before calling for his armour.

Throughout my reviews I have been highlighting my favourite acting role of that performance. This is rather naughty of me as I know that acting, like football, is a team game and it is wrong to pick out individuals as the 'man of the match'. Yet they always do in football reports and we pretty much always do as we leave theatres and cinemas ourselves, so I am going to do so again here! Yet it is important just to restate the fact that we all realise it always depends on the others and that each individual performance is only possible through the interaction with the other members of the cast.

Having said all that and despite all this praise for others, and more to come, I thought Macduff was probably the most spot-on character in it. (Well, Duncan was too, but poor Duncan doesn't have very long to live.) CSF stalwart, Rob Goll gives a sterling performance as Macduff. So much so that I cannot currently envisage Macduff as anyone else, so fully did he embody the role for me. The bit where he prowls around the audience, circling in pent up rage to meet Macbeth in mortal combat (though Macbeth has yet to realise this) worked brilliantly.

Malcolm, I always feel, is a really difficult part to play but Adam Boyle seemed unfazed by it. He handled it very well. There was a point where he smiled and in what seemed an inappropriate manner as Macduff's grief at his family slaughter was fresh and devastating, yet the text cries out for him to be something like that. Certainly his 'testing of Macduff' came across with an authentic air to it.

The customary doubling, tripling and even quadrupling was effortlessly managed (at least, I should say, they make it seem effortless!) and special tribute here has to go to Amanda Madison. Not only was she the 1st witch, Seyton (pronounced Satan) and the tragic young son of Macduff but she was also the porter's sidekick in a Hallowe'en devil's outfit. Her role as his extended even into the interval – a clever touch – with her impish antics keeping the audience entertained even then. Amanda seems a protean being, as she appears physically different in every role. I could not help but think, in the interval, how it must have been nice for her to release her comic side after playing Lavinia earlier in the festival, in *Titus Andronicus*. That was a part she performed so convincingly that part of one wishes she really hadn't. It is still haunting me weeks and many performances of other plays later.

Yet, and yet, and yet, this brings me to the one scene that I did not care for, and that was the Porter scene, albeit with Amanda's bright and irresistible demon adorning it. Before coming on to my disquiet I want to stress that Alexander Gordon-Wood (yes, again) performed the part splendidly, and he excelled in the role he was given. Yet the role itself was the problem (for me, anyway) because I do not think that we need an invented modern character with traces of Billy Connolly and large doses of Rab C Nesbitt, plus a myriad of modern references, in the middle of a Shakespeare play. It all took us very far away from Shakespeare.

Yes, you can counter, it got laughs. Then again, it was not the kind of laughter I so praise the Festival for in my book, instead it was obvious and short and unconnected to the play. It was at things such as “no minimum wage” and other references not of Shakespeare’s age or in his ken. And the thing about Shakespeare is that he is a pretty good writer and not too shabby a dramatist, so, when you re-write things, then you’re likely to come off by far the worse. You impoverish rather than improve, and the Porter scene is, or at least should be, an integral part of *Macbeth*. It is not merely ad hoc low humour. Much of Shakespeare’s text did survive but it failed to resonate, punctuated as it was by lines interspersed from 450 years or so later.

The modern comic take here distanced us from the world of the play, in fact it was like another interval. I think there is a good argument to be made for running these plays without any interval at all and *Macbeth* is a prime example of plays that would benefit from this. However, an interval we always have and that already brings us back to modern-day (especially with the proliferation of ubiquitous mobile phones, the minute the interval is declared) and with this rewritten scene it felt like there was a double eruption of the modern-day into what is usually a carefully crafted Elizabethan ambience to festival performances.

One of the great joys of the festival is entering the gardens and leaving the modern city behind. You feel yourself transported back in time. Then you usually watch actors recreate an Elizabethan ambience and this does not include 21st-century references and late 20th-century humour.

I caught this scene again, while traipsing back and forth from King’s to Trinity, on the following Saturday night and it was very different, as you’d expect with such a heavy reliance on improvisation. I am not against this part of it at all, as doubtless the scene was improvised extensively in Shakespeare’s day. (And Gordon-Wood played it gloriously. This time Amanda found the Porter wine rather than cheese and this appealed to his hung-over and in need of “swally” state). However, it was not just improvised; there was still the new – non Shakespearian – script being followed, as again we had the same jokes about, “trainees”, “interns” and “minimum wage”.

Maybe it is just me being pedantic or old-fashioned and if so, I apologize, but I always try when reviewing, to answer Bob Dylan’s howling question “how does it *feel*?” and that is how it felt to me.

Still, that was but one scene, glance back up through my review and you will see that otherwise I am lauding it with praise. It is a really fine production and you would be mad, madder than a mad thing, madder than a *Macbeth*, to miss it.

As a final, side, note - you really had to feel for the actors that night. Not only did they have to put up with fairly heavy rain through nearly the whole of the first half of the play, but they also had to contend with background music. This presumably came from the neighbouring College garden and it was distracting most of the time and considerably worse than that at others. As sod’s law would dictate, it became louder as the more inappropriate musical choices were played. So, an instrumental that was ill fitting, but not too obtrusive, was played very quietly while a ludicrously inane ‘party song’ that was totally inappropriate played over the ending scenes at high volume. The cast soldiered on manfully (personfully?), of course, as they always do, used as they are to all kinds of interruptions.

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