

Macbeth Review

(Captured through discussion with Dr Methven's VBk2 English Set)

Impressively disruptive, bucking all kinds of expectations, *Macbeth* landed in the QEII theatre for four performances with a lot of "sound and fury", flamboyant costumes, constant lighting (in the manner of Globe performance practice), no interval, a strong awareness of text, of the rhythm of the delivery of the verse, and some incredible performances. Design told its own story: a pentacle dominated the stage floor, to be accessed by the witches and the Macbeths, but blithely walked over by characters who had no awareness of its existence or power. The contrast between the dark costumes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the brightly coloured rest of the cast strengthened the mood of the play. Banquo and Macduff's RAF blue military garb signalled the kind of characters they were on a visual level before they spoke. The Thanes (Ezekiel, George, Charles, Harvey and Yasser) were in a range of colourful kilts and highly stylised face-paint suggesting they had escaped from a new romantics pop group from the 70s or 80s. The witches wore a mash-up of Halloween and religious clothing to challenge what we think of religious fervour from the period of the script's first performance, and the conflict between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church at the time of James I. The witches were a strong ensemble, with a controlling harpy as their leader, Anna in cassock and high heels, jumping down the throat of anyone who spoke before her in a crazed manner. Matching her in freakish difference were a young William in kilt and blacked-out eyes (doubling to chilling effect as a silent child in the Macduff household), and an outrageously costumed George in a nun's robes, a beard, fishnets, and red shoes. His flash of a curtsy to Macbeth was gruesome. A further group of younger pupils (James, Will, Kourosh, Theo and Johnny) fleshed out the witch scenes as witches' familiars, costumed as toads, crows and cats.

Comedy was placed centre stage to reinforce the black humour of the script. Callum played a ferocious Porter with a stand-up comedian's sense of not giving a hoot, armed with vampirish make-up, an Elizabeth I bright orange fright wig, and a matching bottle of Irn-Bru that suggestively found meaning in his range of jokes about lechery. Callum appeared to have drunk so much Irn-Bru that he staggered around in a suspect strut and spun on the spot when trying to punch himself in the face. The production chose to showcase Duncan as a King who allowed the chaos to thrive. Kilian was loose and expressive in his inhabiting of the role, far from any uptight Jacobean notion of kingship as discussed in 4.3 between Malcolm (a sternly bureaucratic Rentaro in a double-breasted suit) and Macduff (an emotionally powerful Luke). Duncan wore long robes, engaged in on-stage kisses, and was hyperbolically dramatic in his speech and manner, providing a sense of comic relief in an otherwise dark and tragic play. He was more a hippie love guru, delighting in the quality of the air at the castle of the Macbeths, than the monarch of a divided Scotland in the early medieval period. If the audience was looking for a figure in traditional Jacobean dress, the slyly toadying Seyton (pronounced Satan), Macbeth's loyal lackey, a performance of chilling efficiency from Tully, was decked out in doublet and hose.

The narrative arcs of some characters had been reinforced with added stage presence: Fleance (a striking performance from Arthur) provided a line through the play not usually explored, clearly a close friend of Donalbain (Rufus) in the early scenes, cheekily trying out his future throne in 3.1 before the Macbeths enter as King and Queen, and appearing as the third apparition to claim a place on the throne once more with his warning about "great Birnam wood". His final entry on stage was in response to Malcolm's desire to call home "exiled friends abroad", suggestive of the story yet to be told after the play closes. His performance was a neat foil to one of great vitality from Hugo as Banquo,

whose staunch character was fleshed out with a drunken stagger after the victory feast of 1.7, and a demonic bloody intervention as the ghost in Act 3. There was impressive strength in depth even in the smallest of roles: we had a heartfelt and emotional performance from Oscar as Siward, Earl of Northumbria, who expertly portrayed the struggle of dealing with his son's death, and the need to show himself to be strong in front of his men. Oscar's younger brother, Hugo, played his son, Young Siward, who was dispatched in double-quick time by the murderous Macbeth in the final scenes. The stage story of the Macduffs was given added prominence with their bodies strewn across the stage from 4.2 into 4.3 – present on the floor as a reminder of the violence visited upon them while Macduff grieved for them. Friedrich rose to become the gentlewoman, shrewdly keeping watch on Lady Macbeth in 5.1 to the annoyance and amazement of Alex as a doctor troubled by what he witnessed. The dead children (Benedict and William) rose to claim Lady Macbeth as their victim and boldly dragged her from the stage to her death, avenging furies, acting on behalf of all the damaged children and families mentioned in the text.

This was a unique, modern interpretation of a well-known play that captivated the audience's attention, adding refreshing twists to what could have been a duller, traditional staging. Dr Methven and Mr Baddeley perfectly disrupted the audience's view of the play, in the same way in which Macbeth and his "fiend-like queen" disrupt the natural order of the world. The partnership of greatness is also disrupted: the couple moved through a gamut of emotional states and actions, from lovey-dovey, to murder plans, to weird sexual fantasies, harming each other both physically and mentally. Arguably they are their own victims, suffering more than those who get in their way: "it is better to be that which we destroy than by destruction dwell in joy". Traditionally, Lady Macbeth has been seen as the instigating villain in the first Act, however Michael and Francesca's portrayal of both characters, switching three times within the play, flawlessly embodied that partnership, equally responsible, equally deserving of a place in hell. These two central performances rightly garnered enthusiastic cries of appreciation from each audience, and are both to be commended for their inhabiting of the joint roles of the Macbeths. The show stimulated widespread discussion after: never before has a play at Winchester College so stirred up opinion.