



What We've Seen

Macbeth **The Shakespeare Theatre**

September 8, 2004
By Deryl Davis

Washington has seen several interesting and even off-beat productions of Shakespeare's **Macbeth** in recent years, including a compelling, Southern-fried Macbeth-on-the-bayou at the Folger Theatre in 2001. But if you don't like that modernizing, role-changing, motif-driven stuff, The Shakespeare Theatre's new no frills, no nonsense production

of the Scottish play might just be for you. Tightly directed by Artistic Director Michael Kahn, with a strong lead performance by Patrick Page, this is Shakespeare with a big T for tradition, offering few surprises, but delivering on the expected package of evil, corruption, guilt, and revenge.

Although Kahn chose *Macbeth* as a vehicle for film and stage actress Kelly McGillis (Lady Macbeth), it's Page who shines throughout the production. He looks every inch the ambitious general, tall and well-built, with features strikingly reminiscent of the swashbuckler Errol Flynn. Page's natural air of command is augmented by a boys' club bonhomie; it's easy to imagine this Macbeth hanging out with the guys at the pub and captaining the local curling team. Kahn cleverly emphasizes this affability right from the beginning. Macbeth's first entrance is on the shoulders of his comrades in arms, all of whom see the witches together, although only Macbeth and Banquo speak to them (in a joking, mocking fashion).

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RICHARD TERMINÉ

Patrick Page as Macbeth and Kelly McGillis as Lady Macbeth.



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As the play proceeds, we watch the laughing, self-deprecating Macbeth grow ever more remote and self-absorbed, a striking contrast which illustrates the corrosive power which evil has upon him.

Page also uses Macbeth's soliloquies to establish rapport with the audience. We know this is a sociable fellow who needs to talk things out, and talk he does. With a couple of exceptions (notably, the dagger speech and "tomorrow and tomorrow"), Page delivers the most famous soliloquies in a slightly understated tone, as if sharing his deepest thoughts with a friend over a brew in that pub. Even in the spiral of self-destruction, Macbeth is able to laugh, however sardonically, at his state and to shake his head in amazement that things have come to this. That naturalism is especially evident in the banquet scene, perhaps the strongest in this entire production. Taking a psychological tact, Kahn doesn't give us the battered and bloodied Banquo, with "twenty mortal murders on [his] crown," but instead invites us into the precincts of Macbeth's guilty mind. We watch the usurper swing back and forth between fear, disbelief and angry resolution that no man, much less a ghost, will thwart his plans to secure the throne. This resolution is nicely borne out when, near the end of the scene, Page's Macbeth attacks Banquo's empty chair with a knife, stabbing it time and again.

On the other hand, Page's delivery of the famous "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech following news of Lady Macbeth's death seems oddly contrived. Usually played as an existential cry of resignation, here it is Macbeth's equivalent to Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech – a suicidal moment, dagger in hand, pointed to the neck. We see a silhouette of Lady Macbeth, hanging by the neck, on the backdrop, and we know the desperate situation of this man, but it's hard to imagine this now-remorseless killer suddenly turning the blade on himself. His love for his wife, whatever place it once had in his life, has clearly become secondary to his lust for power.

For her part, Kelly McGillis' Lady Macbeth is appropriately strong-willed and manipulative, the original bossy wife. She literally gives her husband the shove every now and then when his resolution begins to wane. There's no doubt their relationship is built on physicality, and in that regard, McGillis' Lady M can more than hold her own. However, the production also suggests a level of sexual

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intimacy that is never really borne out. There's little spark between these two - natural enough, perhaps, when one considers all that's on their minds - but puzzling nonetheless. One answer may lie in the way McGillis plays Lady M; she's almost always overwrought, whether with joy while reading Macbeth's letter about the witches, or as in most of the play, with guilt, doubts, and despair. It's unfortunate that McGillis plays Lady Macbeth at such a fever pitch throughout that, impressive though it may be, much of her character's emotional coloring disappears. When we learn of Lady Macbeth's death, it is almost with relief - she has been fighting hysteria for so long.

RICHARD TERMINE



Patrick Page as Macbeth surrounded by the Witches (left to right: Jewell Robinson, Naomi Jacobson, and Sarah Marshall).

Michael Kahn directs this play as a psychological thriller, not a tale of the supernatural, but in most ways, the production runs along very traditional lines. There's no postmodern irony here when Malcolm tells MacDuff to stop weeping over his dead children and "dispute it like a man," or when Old Siward sees more honor than sorrow in news of his son's death. Kahn's direction is so literal (in the best sense) and so faithful to the text that, at times, it almost comes as a surprise.

On the other hand, his doubling of the witches as Lady Macbeth's ladies-in-waiting and of Duncan (a very regal Ted van Griethuysen) as the porter, adds interesting nuance to familiar roles. Here, the witches (played with ominous enthusiasm by Naomi Jacobson, Sarah Marshall, and Jewell Robinson) are a cross between groveling, animalistic soothsayers and Greek sibyls, possessed by powers beyond themselves. When Macbeth journeys to the witches' cave in act four, all the lines attributed to the apparitions are spoken by the witches themselves, who swoon in the ecstatic embrace of prophecy. The upshot of depicting the witches this way, and doubling them as

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Lady Macbeth's ladies-in-waiting, is to make them more human, not less, reducing the supernatural to an experience, rather than an actual thing or event.

Some audience members may see parallels with Roman Polanski's 1971 film version of *Macbeth*, particularly in the opening scenes involving the witches' incantation, the battle, and Macbeth and Banquo's meeting with the witches, as well as in a tableau in the play's final moments. I don't think these similarities are intentional, but like Polanski, Kahn intercuts the first two scenes, emphasizing the connection between violence and evil, and poses a question at the end of the play which forces the audience to re-think the meaning of Malcolm's restoration.

The doubling of Duncan and the porter (both van Griethuysen) is an inspired choice, hinting at the extremes one man may embody, as Macbeth does. Kahn also uses light and shadow to great effect throughout the play, especially in the porter scene, where the witches' silhouettes flash on the gate as the porter speaks of Hell and its occupants. Another thought-provoking choice is the doubling of Macbeth's servant Seyton as one of the murderers. Often depicted as one of many retainers trapped in service to the tyrant, here Seyton is Macbeth's top henchman, leading the charge in the murders of Banquo and MacDuff's family.

Linda Cho's Jacobean costumes are resplendent, perfectly fitting a traditional production, and John Coyne's spare, sleek, steel and Plexiglass set, in which opaque rectangular panels lift to reveal Macbeth's palace and the witches' lair, emphasizes in important fashion the thin division between civil society and lawless ambition. Michael Chybowski's fluid lighting design richly complements this world of shadow, where the witches' pernicious influence is never far away.

Michael Kahn and his team deliver a handsome, faithful *Macbeth* for those who take their Shakespeare straight.