

Festival Theatre : Macbeth****

If you met three strange women on a blasted heath, and those three women told you that you would be king, you'd probably think you'd had one too many on the way home. But what if someone you met in a bar told you they could make you into the next Beyoncé or Ed Sheeran? Wouldn't you be just a little bit curious? So maybe the Thane of Glamis can be forgiven for believing the witches who tell him he will be 'king hereafter'.

Macbeth may be set in mediaeval Scotland, but it was written for an audience of the 17th century, at a time when James I had just acceded to a hotly contested throne. Royalty was not about photo opportunities and smart weddings; the king was an absolute ruler. King James himself had written that 'Kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods.' It is in this context that we must view Macbeth's lust for power, but the National Theatre's excellent new production of the Scottish play also has much to say about political life in the 21st century.

Under Rufus Norris's direction *Macbeth* is transported to a strange no man's land. A huge ramp dominates the set, perhaps

a symbol of the slippery slope that Macbeth and his wife seek to climb. It's a useful device, bringing lots of action to the stage, although the frequent set changes seem a bit clunky at times, the ramp being wheeled first to this side and then that while we wait for something to happen.

Rae Smith's stage design is, however, largely impressive; two wooden walls represent the Macbeths' castle – with very few props those same walls look at first homely (there are even flowers), then begin to resemble a prison as the world closes in on the tormented couple. In the final scenes the walls are smeared first with graffiti, then with blood. The trees of the forest may look a bit like upturned mops, but they provide observation posts for the witches, whose very presence emphasises the moral chaos unfolding down below.

Witchcraft was, of course, a major issue in Shakespearean England – the king was obsessed with it and attended the North Berwick witch trials in person. In Norris's production the witches take on an ethereal quality; they drift about, their eyes smeared with black – are they zombies or junkies? Strange sounds accompany their appearances, their voices echo. Their 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' speech is perhaps the key to the whole play, as Macbeth loses his grip on reality and is increasingly able to convince himself that everything he does, every betrayal and murder, can be justified, and truth becomes nothing more than a matter of opinion.

Michael Nardone makes the part of Macbeth his own; his is not a two-dimensional villain, but rather a tortured Alpha male who cannot control his lust for power. He knows – or at least he starts off knowing – that he shouldn't murder people to get it, but once he's started he can't stop, egged on as much by his own ego as by his ambitious partner.



Image courtesy of Brinkoff/Moegenberg.

Nardone shows us a man who successfully convinces himself that he's in the right, but still retains the tiny bit of humanity that leaves him heartbroken at the death of his wife. Both Nardone and Kirsty Besterman skilfully convey the intensity of the relationship that binds them to the end.

Like her husband, Lady Macbeth was human, once. She insists that she would have dashed her own baby's brains out rather than break a promise to do so, yet she can't kill the king herself because he looks too much like her own father.

Besterman's Lady Macbeth is a woman who *wants* to be heartless ('unsex me here, And fill me...full of direst cruelty') but cannot escape her guilt. When he becomes king, Nardone's Macbeth quickly adopts little regal gestures – the flick of the fingers, the sweep of the hand. One can imagine him practising in front of a mirror. Later, as he starts to fall apart, he is twitchy and jumpy, 'full of scorpions is my mind'.

While every actor in this cast is good, Deka Walmsley is an especially noteworthy Porter. In his equivocation speech in Act II he manages both to entertain and to remind us of the way in which words – like Macbeth's thoughts – can be twisted

to mean just about anything. Finding the truth in this confused, chaotic world is as difficult in Jacobean times as it is today. Lisa Zahra's Lady MacDuff is a beautiful, sensitive interpretation of a strong, wronged woman whose husband has abandoned her for his own safety; she struggles to believe that so much evil is coming her way.

As directed by Norris, the two murderers (Brad Morrison and Elizabeth Chan, both excellent) are the underclass; volatile losers looking to make a quick buck any way they can;

'I am one, my liege, whom the vile blows and buffets of the world have so incensed that I am reckless what I do to spite the world.'

Unsurprisingly, Macbeth has no trouble persuading them that all their past misfortunes are down to either the late king or his latest target, Banquo. Parallels with the 21st century abound.

Although it is not clear in which decade this production is set – it could be the recent past or the dystopian future – Moritz Junge is to be congratulated on his costume design.

King Duncan's red suit is a most effective idea; the king is at once the star of the room and the one who will die a bloody death. The minute Macbeth gets his hands on the crown, he too is dressed in red; he too is doomed.

For the most part the cast hang about in modern dress – Lady Macbeth starts off in jeans and t-shirt, changing into sparkly evening dress for the party; the Thane of Ross (Rachel Sanders, well cast) stomps around in flak jacket and backpack. Macduff is cool and urbane, Malcolm, the late king's slightly wet son, seems to be wearing some sort of shell-suit. The witches, of course, have all the best gear, their floaty, transparent capes enhancing their supernatural air.

One problem I did have with this production were some of the

accents. Nardone is a Scot and sounds like one, but the other actors wobble about somewhere between a Hebridean lilt and broad Geordie. The witches sometimes sound like they're lost in the middle of Yorkshire. This aside, Norris's *Macbeth* is a powerful new take on a play dripping with timeless themes that resonate today.

Macbeth is at the Festival Theatre, Nicolson Street at 2.30pm and 7.30pm on 27 October. Its subsequent tour will include performances at His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen (7-10 November), Theatre Royal, Newcastle (13-17 November) and Theatre Royal, Glasgow (19-23 February 2019).