

Macbeth, performed by the Factory at The Willow Globe

As a regular viewer of contemporary and performance art, as opposed to theatre, I was intrigued to witness the Factory's performance of Macbeth. This was my fourth production; each has been different and this one was to be especially so. Directed by Reuben Grove and performed in the open air at the Willow Globe, surrounded by the Radnor hills of mid-Wales, it was at times challenging to follow; but it was also inclusive as it integrated the audience into the play.

The production contrasted notably with the last Shakespeare performance I saw, coincidentally also Macbeth: a traditional, costumed production at the Globe – the other one. A third of the scale of London's, the Willow Globe shoots up from the organic meadowland of Penlanole, and the intimacy of this globe is also its strength. Ten years old, a metre in growth for each year, the soaring willow, woven around the audience - an almost solid wall of green - creates both a snug atmosphere for an evening's entertainment, and brings the actors into an electric proximity; each gesture of a raised eyebrow or an elbowed nudge is immediate and its emotion palpable.

The performance of Macbeth began softly, a couple of hours before dusk. I say 'softly', because the actors meandered amongst the audience before the performance. They sat and chatted with an idle air, chewing the cud on the day's events, putting us – especially Willow Globe newbies - at ease. So familiar was the setting for the performance, you might have been chatting merrily with 'Macbeth' or 'Macduff' unawares – for all the actors were in contemporary dress, not traditional costume. Whilst this seems a notable feature, Jacobean dress was, of course, contemporary to Shakespeare; so perhaps the Factory were in fact doing something obvious and right, in stripping away unnecessary, encumbered tradition. It certainly made for a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere.

Director Reuben Grove took to the stage and introduced to us the Factory's ethos: no costume; no props and no set. He also introduced us to two Macbeths, two Lady Macbeths and two Rosses: each to be played by both a male, and a female actor. Was this a knowing tribute to Shakespeare's era in which female parts were played by young men or simply a practical response to sharing out parts amongst a large company, or a way of exploring gender roles on and off the stage? Perhaps a combination of all. I felt that this was going to be an interesting production but what I didn't realize was how hard I'd have to concentrate to keep up with who was who. In the end I was glad of my memory of the play from past Macbeth performances; so paradoxically the performance did ultimately require prior experience and knowledge from its audience.

No props; so how does that work? The Factory uses its cast as props and scenery; the focus of the company's ethos is on the immediacy of the live, human performance and experience: actor to audience. When Macbeth and Banquo return from battle across the moor, the cast played the wind moving through the meadow, arms aloft, hands as horses' heads, crows crowing. In Tourette's-like ticks,

hand-rubbing (“Out damn spot!”), wiping hands across mouths (after telling untruths?) this collective performance was disconcerting at first (‘Who was playing what?’) until I recognized that the actors worked as one. They manifested a conscious spirit in the theatre, sometimes a benevolent spirit and even evil, conniving one, pestering our minds with awful thoughts, dread and death.

The delivery of the infamous line, “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” directed towards another actor, was initially perplexing too, until I noticed its recipient’s fingers were crossed. Actors played cross-fingered ‘daggers’ and clasped-hands ‘swords’. These ‘props’ moved in response to their owner, ‘swords’ led on the hip as if the pair were co-joined twins, fighters were able to communicate with their sword in a language only they understood.

Marianne Oldham’s Macbeth was captivating. Her movements across the stage were casually balletic whilst emanating a masculine air (and off it too, as she and the cast were amongst the crowd often uniting us as extras during crowd scenes). Her Macbeth was a proud, solid rock of a character, embracing the opportunity of power, catching your eye and with a scheming glint in hers, delivering a line directly to you. The consequence was that you became complicit in his (her?) doomed trajectory towards evil.

The gender swaps became most apparent and intriguing when Oldham’s Macbeth was on stage with Lady Macbeth, played by Freddy Elletson: a taller, younger man. The scheming of Elletson’s Lady Macbeth became so much more physical, her (his) words menacing and threatening. The fear in Macbeth’s eyes, Lady Macbeth towering above and claspng his (her) neck, suggested an abusive relationship of an emotional, and potentially physical quality.

A seamless transition took place between Scott Brooksbank and Marianne Oldham as Macbeth, Oldham performing half lines with Brooksbank completing them, the pair moving ever-closer to each other until finally they touched as though crossing over, Brooksbank becoming the embodied character of Macbeth. Scott Brooksbank’s Macbeth was as physical but his mannerisms heightened, almost manic. His apprehensive power-scheming shifted into a more confident, strident character who had secured the bloody throne - until doubts and cracks began to seep in and unravel with the appearance of Banquo’s ghost.

Banquo not only serves as the foil and light side to Macbeth’s dark side, he also served as a visual thread that stitched together this staging, played by a single male actor across all scenes. The fact that Banquo was actually injured from a real-life tree-fall aided the permeable boundary drawn by the Factory’s thought-provoking approach towards play and performance. In another example of this curious strategy, a real life couple fully integrated their baby into a papoose-carrying Ross. As on-stage witches echoed the baby’s moans off-stage, this eerie, live response to real-life events unfolding questioned the usual distinction in theatre between illusion and reality.

We were taken out of the Willow Globe into the Big Top after the interval. A larger space, the performance's initial intensity and the close proximity of actors to audience were lost; but in the round, with the seated audience encompassing the entire stage, this interior allowed for a more playful, physical dance that filled the tent with movement with its roof amplifying vocal delivery. Here there were also still, quiet, solemn moments: the slaughter of Macduff's wife and young son (played movingly by the company's eldest actor) as a particularly moving example. Again the cast played all manner of animals, weather, landscape and props, both within the interior and around the perimeter of the tent: armies surrounding and encircling us, creating the fabric of its walls.

The prophesying sisters returned, tormenting the mind of Lady Macbeth - now performed by Oliva Mace, her eyes full of dread. A sea of the cast surrounded and suffocated her, pulling at her clothes, evoking evil spirits or - in contemporary terms - a disturbed mind besieged by mental illness? Whilst the tent became very claustrophobic in this fateful scene, tinged with a dark brooding atmosphere, Macbeth & Macduff's duel was a shamanistic tribal dance performed through human swords, shadow choreographed by the verbal ticks of their owners. Introducing humour and ridicule and lacking the gravity of a death fight, it wasn't clear to me how intended this was.

This felt an ambitious staging by The Factory. Without costume to aid character recognition, and with characters played by different actors, the production asked a lot from its audience: not least to concentrate fully throughout the tense tragedy. By throwing into question the gender of the major characters and moving the staging from the intimacy of The Willow Globe to the openness of the big-top tent, it also kept the audience on its toes. Unconventional in many respects but true to the essence of Shakespeare's word, it made you listen intently - and I was gripped and left with a greater understanding of the dialogue. By reward, the Factory was successful in their aim to produce a powerful response from the simple tools of the human voice, movement and expression.

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