

REP's surprisingly static 'Macbeth' pushes away emotion

Gail Obenreder, Special to The News Journal 6:20 p.m. EST November 20, 2014



Elizabeth Heflin is Lady Macbeth, and Lee Ernst is Macbeth in "Macbeth" at the Roselle Center for the Arts in Newark.(Photo: Courtesy of Paul Cerro)

For its second production of the season, the Resident Ensemble Players at the University of Delaware has mounted "Macbeth," Shakespeare's iconic portrayal of power gone awry.

The play begins with otherworldly incantations and expectations of strange magic and is filled with energetic stage battles, but this production, while worthy and well-spoken, is surprisingly static.

Director Leslie Reidel offers his interpretation on a contemporary set by C. David Russell, designed to evoke the majesty and bleakness of castles in the Scottish landscape. Much as a castle would have dwarfed its inhabitants, these towering wooden walls often dominate the actors, who open the play in modern dress and are gradually invested with historicity as they don Martha Hally's inventive and glittering costumes. Eileen Smitheimer's sound design underscores the action, but bumping in and out of the production, the original music by Charles Gilbert sometimes intrudes with puzzling comments on the work.

Elizabethan productions had no scenery and no programmatic guides, so the bard gave his company large chunks of exposition that set the scene and elucidate the often-complex plots. Here, the text is clear and the action is ably delineated, thanks to the strength of the acting company, as well as the admirable text work of voice and speech coach Andrew Wade.

As in most of Shakespeare's plays, the large cast of characters requires doubling by the actors, and again, the company handles this sometimes arduous task with aplomb.

The roles of the Thane and his wife are pinnacles of achievement for actors. Macbeth (Lee Ernst) and Lady Macbeth (Elizabeth Heflin) begin with powerful intimacy and sexual connection. Clearly, they relish the challenges offered them by the production and approach them with skill, but once their characters set out on the juggernaut of evil to which they have committed themselves, there is little variation.

The supernatural held a more central place in daily life of Shakespeare's audiences than it does now, and Thomas C. Hase's evocative lighting shifts easily into the magical sequences required of a work filled with the otherworldly action of ghosts and witches.

Here, the three witches – whose incantations to Hecate are often said to be the source of the curses that follow productions of “the Scottish play” – are portrayed by Aaron Lathrop's eerie puppets manipulated by equally eerie faceless actors costumed in black. Dipping and swooping, with crackling voices and jerky movements, they provide much of the magic that the rest of the play never quite matches.

REP program notes generally include a welcome interpretive essay by a UD scholar, in this case English professor Miranda Wilson, who also served as the production's dramaturge. She says of the play that “the whiff of the supernatural ... is only one part of its disturbing energy.”

With its witches and battles and kingly trappings, this work may seem like a period piece. But the Scottish play should have power after all these years because it is also an intimate tale. The darkness at the heart of this work is the darkness inside the hearts of women and men who are transfixed and consumed by the lust for power and domination.

If “Hamlet” is a tragedy of the consequences of indecision and inaction, “Macbeth” is its polar opposite. It is a tragedy of the unforeseen consequences of action driven by unfettered ambition. There is plenty of physical action in Reidel's production, but the combination of declamatory style and nonstop movement often push away the intimate emotional content of this haunting tale, which is – or should be – also a cautionary fable for our own time.

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