

Macbeth Two Ways, in North Hollywood

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Blood of Macbeth at Zombie Joe's Underground

Summer is for Shakespeare, usually in the park, but this season, *Macbeth* is blooming everywhere like Scottish thistles. At New York's Lincoln Center, Alan Cumming stars in a one-man version set in a lunatic asylum, produced by the National Theatre of Scotland. This coming week, Long Beach Playhouse opens a staging that focuses on "fidelity and falsehood." ("We refer to it as the 'Leather, Sex and Redemption' version of *Macbeth*," writes that show's director.)

Wear heavy armor if you're in North Hollywood. You can't walk down Lankershim without bumping into the paranoid, lily-livered bastard. Three blocks apart, Antaeus Company is producing director Jessica Kubzansky's classically regal double-cast rendition, while down the street at Zombie Joe's Underground — the local parish for macabre goth parodies —

Josh T. Ryan directs his own nuthouse-redux adaptation with seven flesh-revealing weird sisters attired in an array of fishnet stockings and short shorts, while Macbeth prances around, eyes goggling, almost cross-dressed, androgynously fusing himself into his rabid-for-power Lady.

No, this isn't the brainchild of some festival director's vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself, as the show puts it — it's the kind of synchronicity of coincidence that used to be called zeitgeist, when that term was more in fashion. Something in the air about ambition and its attendant paranoia landed on all these theaters when they determined that the Scottish play is the story to tell at this same time. Or that something in the Scottish play is the story to tell. Is this a manifestation of post-recession musical chairs at the office? The expression of some larger cultural anxiety that professional ascent may now depend on clawing out the eyes of those whose company we may even enjoy, or pretend to?

When, in 2004, Stephen Dillane presented his beautiful, one-man version at REDCAT, barefoot in a sandbox and accompanied by a trio of musicians, he explained that he was redressing a structural problem: This comparatively short play (for Shakespeare) suffers from the disappearance of its main character for much of Act 4. (King Lear takes a hike for much of Act 4 in his play, too, but who's complaining?) So for one actor to play all the parts in *Macbeth*, Dillane's theory went, the Malcolms and Macduffs who dominate Act 4 become, viscerally, an extension of Macbeth's tortured mind.

This is true, and a very good justification for a solo show. However, it's also true that even with the full cast, the entire play can still be viewed as an extension of Macbeth's tortured mind, with or without

the lead character onstage. Heavens, look at Lady M breathing down his throat, shaming him with her blowtorch scruples to eviscerate conscience and just get on with murdering King Duncan. Nice guy though old Duncan may be, and despite the rewards Duncan bestowed on Macbeth for beating the "Norwegians" on the battlefield, Duncan now stands in the way of the Macbeths' professional ascent and must be removed, according to the Lady's hothead logic.

When, in exile, Lady Macduff and her babe get nixed by King Macbeth's hired cutthroats, Macbeth and his Lady are there, even though they're not in the room. They own these bloody deeds; they've paid for them. Furthermore, the harrowing scene is also the extended gulp representing Macbeth's anxiety. These are the murders that will turn the tide of action against him. It doesn't take much to imagine the scene playing out in his head, even in his absence. Because *Macbeth* is at its core a psychological drama that traffics in backstabbing and remorse.

Antaeus Company remains true to its tradition of presenting on its main stage two complete casts of a classic. The company is dedicated to the scholarly investigation of plays, leading to productions that are faithful to the text and that take only the subtlest of interpretive liberties, and Kubzansky's very respectable *Macbeth* is no exception.

The opening night ensemble featured Bo Foxworth in a fine performance in the title role, looking rugged with twinges — or what the Brits might call whinges — of panic, particularly when holding a dagger and being expected to plunge it into somebody in the middle of the night.

His opening-night Lady was petite, majestic redhead Ann Noble, whose paroxysms of grief upon seeing, at production's start, their infant taken away in a coffin went a long way toward explaining her capacity to expunge compassion, or even feeling, from her heart. That funeral pageant — Kubzansky's invention — with Jessica Olson's era-and-locale-specific costumes, established the production's tone of aristocratic elegance as a pleasing cover for the gothic horrors about to unfold. (Among the reasons for the murder-fest is that Macbeth's rivals for the throne have heirs, and he doesn't.)

The play's spine was clear and absorbing, thanks to the respect for the language, which blew across the stage in lucid breezes, such as in performances by the entire Macduff family (Kitty Swink, Dylan La Rocque and James Sutorius).

Actors as fine as Fran Bennett, Susan Boyd Joyce and Elizabeth Swain couldn't get the witches to sizzle, and the talents of the young men varied from callow to accomplished. Yet there was enough in this solid, picture-book production to compel reflection upon why people turn so ugly.

Hand it to the Zombie Joe company and director Josh T. Ryan to turn the play inside out so that your skin crawls — and that's a compliment. Minus the aforementioned punk-goth witches, seven men in the institutional garb of a prison or a mental ward play all the roles — bringing it closer in concept to Dillane's psychodramatic *Macbeth*. Michael Blomgren's Macbeth is simply terrifying for his/her intensity, when he turns femme upon receiving a Queen Liz-like crown. (Lady M's line, "Out, out, damn spot" — referring to the bloodstains that won't wash off her hands — becomes his line as he takes on both characters in a fusion of evil.)

The seven men open the play humping the corpse of Duncan's predecessor, also an invented scene. It too sets the tone for what is the inverse of Kubzansky's production — sneering, screaming, preening,

satiric, tautly choreographed and as harried as Kubzansky's production is languorous. Ryan's adaptation runs a little more than an hour, settling near show's end onto the image of a cigarette lighter, barely illuminating the cast of ghost-faces: "Life's but a walking shadow," says our throttled king. The production, however, is a galloping shadow, and a noisy one.

It too is full of sound and fury, enacted collectively but signifying a manic swath of angst. It spits in our faces and winks. It defies analyzing. It's just something to be felt. You can't leave this tiny room without feeling something. And that's not bad.

MACBETH | By William Shakespeare, directed by Jessica Kubzansky | Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd. | Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; through Aug. 26 | (818) 506-1983 | antaeus.org

BLOOD OF MACBETH | Adapted and directed by Josh T. Ryan from Shakespeare's play | Zombie Joe's Underground Theatre, 4850 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd. | Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; through Aug. 19 | (818) 202-4120 | zombiejoes.homestead.com