

Theatre Reviews

***Macbeth*. Dir. Paul Miller. Chichester Festival Theatre Main Auditorium, Chichester, UK.**

Reviewed by *Peter Billingham**

On Saturday 26 October 2019, I visited the penultimate (matinee) performance of *Macbeth* at the Chichester Festival Theatre Main Auditorium, a thrust stage in the manner of the Tom Patterson Theatre in Stratford, Ontario and the Sheffield Crucible Theatre in West Yorkshire, UK. The production starred John Simm, who excelled in the central role of Macbeth, and the well-known British television actress Dervla Kerwan as Lady Macbeth. The play was directed by Paul Miller, and the production designer was Simon Daw.

There was a clear and consistent—if problematic—commitment to an “immersive” production, which sought to fuse striking visual imagery and appropriate stage effects with a contemporary music soundtrack by Max Pappenheim. Most of this barrage of images was projected onto a transparent screen, which served as the “backdrop” to the principal performance area of this iconic thrust stage.

Sometimes it felt to this reviewer, and many critics from the UK national press, that the intensity and scale of such images threatened to overwhelm what is surely the core of any distinctive production of Shakespeare’s work: the muscular, theatrical poetry of the layered dramatic language. This felt particularly so when, early in the play, fragments of Shakespeare’s text were projected amidst visual images of darkening mist and storm-laden skies. It possibly signalled a lack of trust on the part of the director in terms of the actors’ projection and audibility.

The young actress Beatriz Romilly, cross-gender cast as Malcolm, struggled vocally and was hampered further by a tendency to speak the verse in an over-emphatic, metered manner, giving it an aural predictability that inhibited both performer and character. It was hard to see how the reversal of gender in this instance offered any radical re-illuminating of the character and his/her

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conflicts and dilemmas. It was very difficult to “suspend disbelief” and believe that this passive character could possibly lead a successful victory by the English/Scottish military axis against Macbeth’s regime. Michael Balogun’s Macduff was strongly etched and characterised by the twin-tragic pain of witnessing Macbeth’s descent into evil and the subsequent murdering of his wife and children.

In conclusion, there were undoubted strengths to this production, especially John Simm in the titular role and, latterly, Kerwan’s Lady Macbeth consumed by madness and guilt: truly, desperately pitiful and existentially derelict.

The temptation towards an ill-defined and perhaps ill-judged need for the “immersive” in many contemporary British productions of Shakespeare threatens to anaesthetise and disempower the potent, dramatically linguistic core of Shakespeare’s writing. Surely tragedy from its classical origins is “immersed” in and driven by a catharsis that doesn’t need or rely upon additional technological strategies. Too often in this production the cast seemed to be in a conflict not only with the struggle against human evil, but more pragmatically against the oversaturation of an over-intrusive musical score and visual cacophony.



Photograph by Manuel Harlan



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***Macbeth Underworld*. Dir Thomas Jolly. La Monnaie/De Mund, Brussels, Belgium.**

Reviewed by *Stephanie Mercier**

The talented 37-year-old French director Thomas Jolly graduated from Rouen High School, in France, as a theatre major, then pursued his degree in performing arts at the University of Caen. In 2003, he joined the School of Dramatic Art of the National Theatre of Brittany in Rennes, while creating his own theatre company, “La Piccola Familia”, in Rouen. He became famous in France, thanks to his 2014 version of *Henry VI* at the Avignon Festival, which won a Molière Award, considered the highest theatre honour in France. Jolly’s *Henry VI* was set against the backdrop of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), between England and France, and the ensuing English civil war commonly known as the “Wars of the Roses” (1455-1485), which saw the royal houses of York and Lancaster rip each other apart. In Jolly’s staging of the composer Pascal Dusapin and the librettist Frédéric Boyer’s contemporary operatic version of *Macbeth*, with Alain Altinoglu as musical director, the director seems to have moved from staging characters fighting against each other onto themes of how they wrangle with their underworldly inner natures. In the opera we also see clearly the translation of the strengths and weaknesses of nature, human nature as well as nature in general, that prompts the question of which one is the biggest threat to the other. Strikingly, for example, what at first seemed to be alive vegetation on stage, due to the writhing bodies within it, became obviously dead trees that nonetheless occupied and then gradually invaded the stage; then, the trees moved in a pincer movement, like nature’s suffocating revenge for the irresponsibly devastating and unnatural goings-on in performance.

Social responsibility and sustainability beyond performance itself also occupied the production. Since the start of his career, Jolly has considered himself a citizen activist; unsurprisingly, therefore, the opera was made freely available to audiences, via streaming, from 17 October to 27 November 2019. The presumably lower carbon footprint version of *Macbeth Underworld* I viewed, on 20 October 2019, was sung in English with French subtitles. It was hence clearly a hub of both creative and technological innovation that facilitated interaction between artistic, interpretive, human and non-human environments. In his evolving relationship with the Bard, Jolly developed our awareness of Shakespeare’s work, not only as a global phenomenon but also as a practice that can serve to criticise damaging practices of mediation between the individual and society, when the inner workings of the individual are harmful to our

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environment. What may be termed Jolly's "cultural ecology of translation" hence signifies ideas of sustainability (e.g. political, nationalistic, environmental), whether it be questions of interpreting Shakespeare or ethical awareness in crisis situations (i.e. survival and extinction). Jolly's approach also means social responsibility with regard to the soft activism of theatre and its operatic offshoots, including productions such as *Macbeth Underworld*.

Macbeth Underworld's libretto contains all the recognisable emblems from *Macbeth*: Scotland, a Ghost (Kristinn Sigmundsson), murder, the Weird Sisters (Ekaterina Lekhina, Lilly Jorstad, Christel Loetzsch), the dagger, the blood stains that are impossible to remove from the hands of Lady Macbeth (Magdalena Kozena) and the Porter (Graham Clark). In sum, all the leitmotifs are the same as Shakespeare's, even if the story slightly differs in that, as the opera's subtitle suggests, it aims to explore the Shakespearean *Macbeth's* underworld environments. More specifically, the operatic version of the play seeks to investigate the subterranean and infernal relationship between Lady Macbeth and her husband (Georg Nigl), as well as their shared monstrous, if unconscious, inner self. The association was made visible through all-white costume, and because both sported a long white plait of hair. Their commonly shared drive for power at all costs was further revealed when long white ribbons bound Macbeth to the Weird Sisters, while Lady Macbeth un-plaited herself and mimed strangling herself with her plait at the same moment she demanded to be unsexed (1:5:39).¹ Above all, the production focussed upon symbols of the couple's combined culpability within the framework of their loving relationship despite everything. The specificity of Frédéric Boyer's libretto was hence to avoid depicting Lady Macbeth as a monstrous manipulator of her ambitious, and easily swayed, husband and to employ lyrics that revealed a jointly responsible pair of murderers mutually possessed by ambition.

The couple in this production was also one that had been profoundly hurt by the loss of their Child (Naomi Tapiola), who is revealed by Shakespeare thanks to one single line in his play: "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1:7:54-55). Here, the ghost of the Macbeths' deceased child was first a silent observer in Jolly's staging. Nonetheless, the character sported tiny antlers to anticipate Ross's lines in Act 4 of the play: "Your castle is surprised, your wife and babes / Savagely slaughtered: to relate the manner / Were, on the quarry of these murdered deer / To add the death of you" (4:3:205-208). Then, Macbeth's "dagger of the mind" (2:1:38) was made physical for the audience when the child appeared, hands bloodied, to present the dagger with which Macbeth would kill Duncan/the Ghost. Poignantly, the Ghost was here depicted sleeping in the Child's room, complete with toys that appeared in silhouette form as the music rose crescendo

¹ The references to the text follow the Norton Edition.

and then subsided, before siren sounds accompanied Lady Macbeth's wails at the sight of her husband's bloodied shirt-front after the murder. In Jolly's staging, we clearly saw how the couple were condemned to constantly relive their grief due to their dead child, and their murders (King Duncan, Banquo etc.), surrounded by ghosts into infinity.

Similarly, Shakespeare's presence was still felt all through; first, thanks to Frédéric Boyer, who is renowned in France as a writer and translator, notably of Shakespeare's Sonnets and *Richard II*. Next, there was a continuing interplay of the sublime and the ridiculous as witnessed in the characters, who were still imagined as comic as well as tragic. This was especially the case for the Porter, who appeared in a tartan robe and a ruff at the beginning of the production, perhaps to conjure up images of the ghost of Elizabeth I. Later, the Porter appeared still in tartan, but with clown make-up and a recognisable pantomime "Knock, knock. Who's there?" line. He contrasted to the obviously tragic, masked, and anonymously generic regal characters, who were only recognisable thanks to their crowns, and who sporadically crossed the stage. Indeed, the aim was clearly to tighten up Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and concentrate on the eponymous couple. When Lady Macbeth almost collapsed due to the seemingly unbearable weight of her usurped diadem during coronation, before images of crows and the night and then a totally blackened stage, Jolly also managed to engage audience responsiveness within this restricted framework by opening up opportunities to include spectators through close coherence with the original and symbiosis with its operatic adaptation.

Thomas Jolly, who has already directed two operas (Cavalli's *Heliogabalus* [1667] in 2016 and Offenbach's *Fantasio* [1872] in 2017) in cabaret style, reemployed the same bravura, with passionate and extravagant characters, to emphasise shared presence and humanity, and to reinterpret Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. As such, the idea of the Macbeths as a monstrous couple could also include the word's etymological notions of demonstration and a capacity for visual and interpretative creation; indeed, this Macbeth couple had the wider function of magnifying the failures of the whole of humanity, thanks notably to an intense use of light. For example, the Macbeths were often seen alone in, or sharing, a huge black-sheeted bed against a backdrop of white beams that progressively turned red, as the forest increasingly appeared to engulf them. This visual transformation symbolised the invisible transformation of Macbeth from a loyal soldier into that of a treasonous usurper. In other words, lighting, and even at times lightning, accompanied Macbeth on his journey from heaven to hell. At the end of his ego trip, refusing to yield, even to the supplications of his ghostly child, Macbeth was submerged backstage by undergrowth as a lit board with Macduff's words: "Here may you see the tyrant" (5:10:26) was displayed upstage. The board was a final announcement of how far ambition can

take a man, and the whole of mankind, and the environmental destruction that this ambition implies to humanity.

The specificity of *Macbeth Underworld* with regards to Jolly's two previous operatic or Shakespearean productions was that it was a new creation, theatrically inspired by Pascal Dusapin's composition. If some of Jolly's recurring motifs reappeared (e.g. recognisable red ribbons to signify blood, a huge bed centre stage to imply intimacy), he refused to comply to a controlling system and clearly enjoyed being kept creatively on the move to all the better be in contact with theatre or opera goers. His is, therefore, an evolving relationship with them that is in tune with his developing connection to Shakespeare. The impact of the non-linear adaptation of Shakespeare's play was to fragment, but also to highlight, important individual aspects of the original text thanks to its reworking and re-thinking with regards to today's and tomorrow's challenges. These challenges include the impact of our action on political and ecological order, which is here revealed through a process of mediation involving both human and digital technologies. Technology as a highly imaginative medium of exchange was also a recognition of the multiple forces that impact Shakespeare today, but that should also be impacted by the work of his interpreters, including Thomas Jolly.



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***King John*. Dir. Eleanor Rhode. The Royal Shakespeare Company. Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK.**

Reviewed by *Lisa Hopkins**

As it says in the title of the play to which Shakespeare was probably responding, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, King John was a problem—to himself, to England, and sometimes to theatre directors. Even I, a hardened theatre-goer of many years' standing, have to stop and think about whether I *really* want to go and see *King John*. But it is the only Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in the whole winter season, so I booked it even though I feared it was going to be troublesome to me too.

It wasn't. On the face of it, there are some odd decisions in this production: King John is a woman, the Dauphin of France has a strong Irish accent, and the Bastard, who keeps having to talk about his size, is played by the smallest adult actor. None of it matters, though, because the production is so consistently successful in finding out where the play's theatrical energies lie. Traditionally, *King John* has been famous for two set-pieces, which can almost be detached from the plot: Constance's lament for Arthur, beloved of Victorian actresses, and the Bastard's "if England to itself do rest but true" speech, something of a watchword in both world wars. Both are here and both are done well, but so too are lots of other bits. I have never heard such sheer power and confidence in John's declaration that he speaks as "England for itself", and I have certainly never seen such a brilliantly funny and anarchic celebration of the wedding between Blanche and the Dauphin, in which food goes flying and the gold balloons which spell out "Just Married" are punctured and rearranged until they read "Just Die". When the arrival of Cardinal Pandulph stops the fight, there is a splendid moment when King John, sobered, picks a fairy cake off the French king's crown and the French king pauses for a moment, looks at it, and says "Thank you". It is a small still moment of calm in the middle of the fraught negotiations.

The fraught negotiations in question being, of course, the Brexit ones. In the months before the 2016 referendum, the RSC warned us about the potential consequences in *Cymbeline*, set in an apocalyptic future, where we are living in caves in Wales. Now, at the latest minute of the hour, we see what happens if you cut yourself off from Europe. It might all be OK: a competent Italian lady cardinal with a Milanese fashion sense might come and bring us back into the fold. Or it might not: there is no mention here of John's successor Prince Henry, and the Bastard's only plan seems to be suicide.

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It is presumably in support of this sense of uncertainty that the production makes what I think is its one mistake. It is generally very helpful to audience members unfamiliar with the plot, particularly in the BBC radio announcer at the beginning, who reports on the coronation and introduces John, his mother (said to have worn Chanel for the occasion), and his niece Blanche. But it is not helpful in its presentation of the death of Arthur. This is brilliantly prepared for in a scene which uncannily couples the trappings of a modern doctor's or dentist's surgery with an iron circle of lit candles—a touch of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, but also a mediaevalising note which makes the proposed blinding comprehensible. What actually happens to Arthur is however totally unclear. He runs along a table with some people standing on either side, he comes to the end, goes over, and two of the people catch him; then next time we see him one side of his face is covered with blood in the eye area and the other is clean. My husband and son, experienced viewers of Shakespeare and not especially stupid, were both baffled, and while I take the point that the death of Arthur is mystified in the play, I did not think this worked. In every other respect, though, I was riveted by this production. And also of course terrified, as we wait to see whether the Hallowe'en horror of Brexit is really going to materialise.