

Shakespeare Theatre Company's *Macbeth* and the Limits of Multiculturalism

Directed by Liesl Tommy
Sydney Harman Hall, Washington, D.C.
Performance Dates: April 26-May 28, 2017

Reviewed by ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN

The curtain rose to reveal a scene of chaos, a theme that was woven into this production of *Macbeth*. Audiences were confronted with a montage of a civil war complete with the sound of automatic weapons and hijab-wearing civilians fleeing from African soldiers. One of the witches yelled into his cell phone, "When shall we three meet again?" which carried a sinister overtone. The witches as clandestine agents were present throughout many scenes, eavesdropping on the characters from the side of the stage wearing headphones and typing on a computer. The witches helped to install Macbeth, monitored and encouraged his bloody path, and orchestrated his undoing. As both outsiders and insiders, they embodied the theme of surveillance. The historical analogue is apt, as King James I instituted a network of spies. Macbeth in this production hired assassins to kill Banquo and Fleance, but he himself was but a pawn in the scheme of the witches and Hecate. The supernatural theme was replaced by international politics. The witches depicted the ubiquitous presence of foreign powers in a politically unstable North African country, making Macbeth's offhand remark to Lady Macbeth especially ironic: "There's not a one of them but in his house I keep a servant fee'd" (3.4.130-1).

Fig. 1: The coronation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

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This production reimagined the Scottish play in a North African political landscape with not-so-subtle visual references to Russian and CIA (or rather, UIA in the production) intervention in civil wars and regime change in an unnamed third world country. Underwritten by the Clarice Smith Series: New Directors for the Classics, and supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the performance combined African dance and action film elements in its blocking and design to situate the narrative in a modern setting. An example of its cinematic elements is the use of *tableau vivant*. Macbeth delivered several soliloquies in the spotlight while action froze around him.

The transposition strategy of adaptation reflected the life experience of Liesl Tommy, an African American director who was raised in Cape Town, South Africa, during the apartheid era. Tommy is no stranger to female victimhood and political theater. Her Tony-winning Broadway play *Eclipsed* (Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., 2009; Public Theater in New York, 2015) chronicles the survival of five Liberian women at the end of the Second Liberian Civil War. Starring Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong'o, *Eclipsed* was the first all-black and female production to premiere on Broadway. Tommy brought the same compassionate vision for gender and racial minority victims to her conception of the African *Macbeth*.

The Shakespeare Theatre Company (STC) is known for their big-budget, high-concept, proscenium stage productions of classical and contemporary plays, and their predominantly white audiences often include dignitaries and politicians. It is not unusual for STC to set their productions in exotic locations, as they did with *Much Ado About Nothing* (dir. Ethan McSweeney, 2011), which was set in Cuba, but it is relatively rare for the company to mount a production featuring mostly minority actors, which is laudable. Not only was the production multicultural, but it also provided Spanish captions during two performances for students, allowing speakers of English as a second language a deeper engagement with the production.

As someone who works on and supports multiethnic theater, I had high expectations for the Shakespeare Theatre Company's latest production of *Macbeth* with nontraditional and gender-bending casting, featuring more women and actors of color with Jesse J. Perez (Macbeth) and Nikkole Salter (Lady Macbeth) in the lead roles. Not coincidentally, Hecate and the witches were the only Caucasian white characters in this universe, which accentuated not only the clash between Western imperialism and the third world but also the power imbalance between black and white communities. Duncan, Donalbain, Ross, MacDuff's unnamed child (a girl in this version), several ensemble members, Siward, and the doctor and porter (both played by Myra Lucretia Taylor) were all female in this production.

Nonetheless, as it turned out, the post-performance talk-back sessions, where actors shared the ways in which they brought their own cross-cultural experience to bear on their roles, seemed more intellectually fulfilling than some scenes in the production. STC's *Macbeth* started out with an intriguing concept of political theater but was executed with some inconsistencies.

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As an easily manipulated third world dictator, Macbeth appeared to be somewhat clownish and inept in most scenes. In one scene he tripped over Lady Macbeth's cape and dress. In another scene, he was incapable of heroic killing as defined by battlefield "code of masculine honor." To earn respect and recognition as a warrior, Macbeth resorted to faking his war-inflicted wounds by cutting his face and asking a soldier to shoot his shoulder. He often needed drugs and alcohol to overcome fear. He sat on the throne in a slumped posture. He crawled in the banquet scene and in the final scene before being killed. When ordering the murder of Banquo, Macbeth came off as petty. He dangled some bills in front of the two assassins but did not give the money to them. The only two killings carried out by Macbeth's own hands were women characters, namely Queen Duncan and Young Siward. The production retained Macbeth's line, "thou wast born of woman," as he killed Siward, which took on an extra layer of significance and anxiety in this gender-bending performance.

Fig. 2: Macbeth in a slumped posture with two child soldiers behind him.

In contrast to more traditional interpretations of the general as ruthless and brute, Perez's Macbeth seemed overwhelmed by the unfolding of events. Lighting effects and the dramatic device of action freeze allowed Macbeth's anxiety in his soliloquies to come through, but it also highlighted the fact that he seemed to be a misfit in the world he was supposed to create. The performance brought irony to the Captain's high praise of Macbeth:

For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution, ...

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Till he faced the slave; ...
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps (1.2.16-22).

In the scene with Hecate, Macbeth was manipulated and seduced by cases of gold, drugs, and weapons. Macbeth was quite intoxicated and far from regal. While Macbeth lacked the height of a Renaissance tragic hero, Lady Macbeth appeared more regal, wearing her headscarf, chin up, as if it were a crown. She owned the stage, particularly in the coronation scene. Unlike some films and productions that exploit Lady Macbeth's sexual appeal in her manipulation of her husband, Salter's Lady Macbeth appeared to be more assertive and clear-headed than Macbeth whose slumped posture diminished his stature in several scenes.

The figure of the child plays an important role in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Tommy's production. The weird sisters raised a bloody child and a child crowned as apparitions, while murderous inspirations were said to be "firstlings" and pity is figured as "a naked newborn babe." Further, the presence of child soldiers—some trained by the witches—offered a modern interpretation of this theme. The child is both the perpetrator and the victim. In one scene, a child soldier was seen wearing wings and an outfit that could only be described as a Halloween costume, bringing to mind both a Victoria Secret model and a Goth girl. Yanu Adav, an ensemble member, explained during the talk-back session that the design reflected the practice in Africa of giving fancy costumes and masks to child soldiers so that they would not reveal their true identity. They could thereby cheat death and engage in more ruthless murders with a cleaner conscience.

Designed specifically with the politically-conscious DC audience in mind and conceived during the 2016 presidential campaigns, as Tommy revealed during a talk-back session, the production's crew and cast initially assumed Hillary Clinton would win the election. Tommy said: "I am very excited about doing this production in D.C. right now. I'm interested in this show being as immediate as possible."¹ For example, wiretapping—a topic that was brought to the fore by President Trump—was clearly on the mind of the creative team behind this production, though the production stayed away from any parodic impulse—such as the approach taken by Oskar Eustis's *Julius Caesar* (Public Theatre, New York, May 23 - June 18, 2017)—and cleverly left the task of image association to the audience to brood over.

When the production eventually opened in Washington, D.C., in late April, 2017, it gained accidental political and historical relevance as investigations into Russian influence on U.S. elections unfolded. Hecate (Stephen Elrod) was played with a Russian accent and mannerism that brought to mind the image of Vladimir Putin. As the supervisor of the three weird sisters (David Bishins, Tim Getman, and Naomi Jacobson) who resembled covert intelligence officers, Hecate gained an extra layer of significance in this production that the character is not usually granted. As the ultimate puppet masters and mistress, they spied on and actively aided Macbeth in his coup and military campaigns. They manipulated Banquo and orchestrated the entire plot. Tommy mentioned during the talk-back session that her team revised the role of Hecate to comment on the Trump administration. In

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the director's note in the program which draws on the lines "alas, poor country, / Almost afraid to know itself" (4.3), Tommy writes: "The personal cost of political chaos ... is a theme central to the story of *Macbeth*. ... Foreign interference has loomed very large in the American psyche of late."² To achieve this goal, the production relied on the conceit of secret agents, which unfortunately did not work in every scene.

What did come through successfully, however, was the questions Tommy used as a through line in the production: "Who benefits from whispering into the ears of an ambitious general that their time has come, that they should murder for power?"³ Curiously, despite Hecate's significance, the character and its performer are not listed in the sixty-one page stage bill.⁴

The costumes and presentation of the three mixed-gender witches—complete with sunglasses even in night scenes—were clearly a reference to Agent Smith in *Matrix* (dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) and Agents K and J in *Men in Black* (dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997). At one point the witches flashed their cell phone as if it were a neuralyzer at bystanders before leaving a scene. Ever so cynical, they frequently took selfies and photos of victims whom they just killed. Other characters, notably the assassins, snapped photos of their victims as well, including Banquo, Lady MacDuff, and her young daughter. The witches' sunglasses were no longer a pragmatic or aesthetic addendum to one's outfit but rather an identity prosthesis to build a character on stage who were none other than "secret black and midnight hags" in Macbeth's words (4.1.48). They served the purpose of concealment as well as—thanks to their ability to draw attention to themselves—the function of setting the witches apart from the rest.

The witches worked for the UIA, which was led by Hecate, trained child soldiers, and even played the role of weapons dealer when they helped to arm Macbeth's camp. They also engaged in the fabrication and dissemination of fake news and misinformation, giving their renowned line "foul is fair, fair is foul" an extra layer of contemporary echo. The witches, rather than Malcolm, closed the play, robbing any political agency from MacDuff and Malcom, repeating their opening line "when shall we three meet again?" As they chanted in unison "Upon the heath / There to meet with ..." (line was cut short), the female witch showed a picture of Macbeth's mutilated head which she just took with her phone. Clearly they were meant to meet with the next dictator and puppet head of state.

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Fig. 4: The three witches in the final scene of the production.

The production was unquestionably an innovative, lavish visual feast (a vintage Mercedes rolled onto the stage during Macbeth's coronation scene; Lady Macbeth rocked formal African dresses), but the theme of visual and aural chaos seemed to take precedence over dramatic narrative. In some moments, the dialogue seemed flat, and the audience ceased to identify with or care about the characters. Act 4 scene 3 in which Macduff tests Malcolm could be abbreviated, as the performance lacked the energy to carry the narrative forward. As part of the production's effort in world making, language was revised in some instances to accommodate these changes. For example, Ross told Macduff that "Your eye in Scotland / would create soldiers, make our women fight / to doff their dire distresses" (4.3.186-188). Interjections in modern American English, including black humor and topical references, appeared throughout the production, particularly by Perez's Macbeth. Macbeth returned from his meeting with the three witches and Hecate at the UIA headquarters with several crates of guns. When a servant walked in on him, Macbeth said: "Never mind the mess. My wife did some shopping on Amazon," which was clearly designed as comic relief and to woo the audience who may be resistant to classical drama. During the banquet scene, to suppress his fear of Banquo's ghost, Macbeth asked for more wine and said "keep it coming" as wine was being poured into his glass. Incoherent props and stage sets sometimes stood in the way of effective dramatization. The scene in the UIA headquarters turned the witches' "eye of newt" speech into a visually rich TED talk. The images on the slides were meant to help audiences visualize the "toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog" as code names for missions and operatives, but they seemed to distract from the language itself. Lady Macbeth's much anticipated sleep-walking scene seemed rushed. The incoherent prop of a lantern was out of place in a media-rich, modern environment. It would be more consistent if Lady Macbeth had carried her cell phone instead, as earlier in the production she read Macbeth's letter on a tablet while sporting a Harvard T-shirt.

The STC *Macbeth's* setting and predominantly multiethnic cast brought to mind Orson Welles's landmark 1936 *Macbeth* which was set in Haiti and featured

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an all-black cast. In both cases, the ethnicity and race of the cast matched that of the characters and cultures in the adaptation's respective universe. Tommy's production engaged in two models of nontraditional casting outlined by the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts and Ayanna Thompson, namely conceptual casting, a model "in which actors of color are [self-consciously] cast in roles to enhance the play's social resonance," and cross-cultural casting, an approach that translates the universe of the play to a different culture and location.⁵ In some instances, multicultural theater, whether made locally or imported as touring theater, can receive mixed reception due to audience's investment in some form of cultural authenticity. Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado About Nothing* (RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon, August, 2012), for example, was set in contemporary Delhi and performed by a cast of second-generation Indian British actors. The production appropriated Bollywood-inspired music. Within the context of UK's World Shakespeare Festival, it was quickly compared by the press to two touring productions at the London Globe from the Indian Subcontinent that were perceived to be more authentic. It is important to promote the work of actors of color, but it is equally important to ensure that design concepts are executed evenly. However, unlike the case of Khan's *Much Ado*, the mixed reception of STC's *Macbeth* did not lie in its use of an ethnically diverse cast or audiences' resistance to the concept of multicultural theater, but rather in the lack of coherence in dramaturgical conceptualization.

Notes

1. Liesl Tommy, Shakespeare Theatre Company Symposium on *Macbeth*, Sydney Harman Hall, Washington, D.C., May 7, 2017.
2. Shakespeare Theatre Company, *Asides: Macbeth* 2016-2017 season, issue 5, p. 4.
3. Shakespeare Theatre Company, *Asides: Macbeth* 2016-2017 season, issue 5, p. 4.
4. Shakespeare Theatre Company, *Asides: Macbeth* 2016-2017 season, issue 5, p. 3.
5. Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76.

Alexa Alice Joubin is Professor of English, Theatre, East Asian Languages and Literatures, and International Affairs at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where she has co-founded and co-directs the Digital Humanities Institute. Her forthcoming books include *Race* in the Routledge's New Critical Idiom series and a co-edited volume entitled *Local and Global Myths in Shakespearean Performance*. She holds the John M. Kirk, Jr. Chair in Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Middlebury College Bread Loaf School of English. At MIT, she is co-founder of the open access *Global Shakespeares* digital performance archive (<http://globalshakespeares.org>).