



## Macbeth

### The Macbeths Lust for Power

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.  
Sunday, April 24, 2011, C-8&9 (center stalls)  
Directed by Jim Warren

"That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold: What hath quenched them hath given me fire." So soliloquized Lady Macbeth, obviously a bit drunk. She also was in darkness: when Macbeth entered the stage from the opposite side, bloody daggers in hand, the room was so dark, they could not see each other. She felt through the air as she moved closer to his voice, he meditating out loud that he could not say, "Amen!" that he would never sleep again, she trying to get him to hush. She reached her husband and clasped him, smiling, but when she took hold of his hands, realized horror chased all traces of alcohol from her system. "Why did you bring these daggers from the place?" she cried.

This scene perfectly captured the singularity of the Blackfriars Playhouse experience. With universal lighting and no scenery, the players (and audience) relied wholly on Shakespeare's lines to set the scene; a theater using lighting effects would have to play the scene in total darkness to get the same effect—which would be fascinating if acted well.

Under the direction of Jim Warren, the actors of the ASC Restless Ecstasy Tour in their home residence also relied wholly on Shakespeare's text to inform their characters' behaviors. Lady Macbeth told us she had been drinking, and so this woman of equal parts bottomless love for her husband and ceilingless ambition for them both became even feistier under the influence of alcohol.

This tour troupe's repertoire also featured *As You Like It* and *Measure for Measure*, and as with those plays, lust was the driving force in their *Macbeth*: sexual lust combined with lust for power. Denice Burbach in particular brought a ravenous sexual appetite to her Lady Macbeth; just reading her husband's letter got her hips swaying and bosom heaving. When he did arrive home she wrestled him to the ground and was soon leading him to bed, all while talking of assassinating their king. Jonathan Holtzman was a stoic Macbeth throughout, but he clearly aimed for the crown before the Weird Sisters suggested it. It seemed the moral doubt he harbored even as he pursued power was what ultimately triggered his tyranny (that and lack of sleep): tyranny was the only way he could ever leap the lone obstacle—an internal obstacle—to his ambition. Much less certain is what sent Lady Macbeth into madness. This production rightly points out Macbeth's turning increasingly inward and pushing away his wife after the murder, and perhaps she was more heartbroken at the loss of her husband's bed than she was haunted by the murder of



Jonathan Holtzman as Macbeth and Denice Burbach as Lady Macbeth fumble through the darkness after the murder of Duncan in their home. This production did not skimp on the blood spilt (or bloody entrails eaten, for that matter). Photo by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.

## WILL POWER ON STAGE

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her saintly guest. No matter, for this production could have been more aptly titled the *Tragedy of Lady Macbeth*, as Burbach's sleepwalking scene was a truly heart-wrenching, pin-drop piece of theater.

This came after the play took an effective turn into the *Tragedy of Macduff*. Chad Bradford "guesses at" the bad news Ross (Daniel Jimenez) came to tell him, and nodded knowingly upon learning that his "castle is surprised." He froze when he heard that his entire family had been slaughtered. When he finally responded he croaked out, "My children too?" Thus, when Malcolm urged him to take revenge on Macbeth, Macduff could only roar, "He has no children!" Then came Macduff's frenzied agitation: "All my pretty ones? Did you say All? O hell-kite! All? What, all my pretty chickens and their dam at one fell swoop?" To the end, even upon killing Macbeth and crowning Malcolm, Bradford's Macduff never showed a glint of satisfaction; for him, none can ever be had.

Most productions of Macbeth bog down in the England scenes; such a fault, it is now obvious, is in the casting. Most producers recognize the need to cast a good Macduff (I've seen more great Macduffs than good Macbeths) but they often overlook Malcolm. Aidan O'Reilly made his Malcolm a presence as early as his being named successor by Duncan, and he somehow turned the often tedious (and many would say worthless) Macduff testing scene into riveting theater. In such hands as O'Reilly and Bradford, we can see how the scene is a vital part of Shakespeare's plot, for not only does it reveal the paranoia infecting Macbeth's Scotland, it prolongs the anguish we the audience bear knowing what happened to Macduff's family while he ignorantly bandies with Malcolm about the latter's over-reaching libido.

This production did not skimp on the blood spilt (or bloody entrails eaten, for that matter). It also poured on the mystical matter more than any I've seen. Not only the Weird Sisters' incantations, but those of Lady Macbeth ("Unsex me here") and Macbeth were given the full supernatural treatment, accompanied by sinister sound effects (this being an electronics-free theater, the noise was that of whirling tubes backstage, we discovered afterward). The Weird Sisters (Natasha Solomon, Brandi Rhome, and Kelley McKinnon) wore mounds of rags and netted veils, moving across the stage like crawling earth, showing the ingredients of their potion to grossed-out members of the audience.

Of course, the Porter (Dennis Henry) was a made-for-Blackfriars character. His part may interrupt the tension of the plot, but this audience, with many a teen on hand, loved his take on lechery. Bradford got the audience to participate in his "Knock Knock" jokes. And what to do with the Porter's concluding selfish line he speaks before finally opening the door for Macduff? Bradford, standing in the stalls, picked up a play program, opened it to the page with his bio, tapped his picture and said, "I pray you, remember the porter."

*Eric Minton  
April 26, 2011*

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