

THEATER REVIEW

Foul isn't just fair, it's downright fine

This 'Macbeth' hits the right notes for a chilling symphony

By James Hebert
STAFF WRITER

At the center of the set for Sledgehammer Theatre's "Macbeth," there's a fat slab of smooth stone, pitched like the bank of a ditch.

It's literally a slippery slope — an apt symbol for the title character's murderous slide into terror and despair.

The Sledgehammer staging, which opened Saturday, faces no such troubles keeping its balance. It's a quirky but sure-footed interpretation of the bleak Shakespeare tragedy, one that preserves the play's chilling impact while introducing just enough twists of its

own.

David Tierney's great, agonized Macbeth seems from the start like a hollow husk, ripe for stuffing with the false bravado of ambition.

Lady Macbeth, his wife, fears he's "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" to pull off their grand plan: murdering King Duncan of Scotland in order to steal his throne. But if that's the case, Macbeth's supply of mercy is way past its sell-by date.

The unstoppable Lady M is, of course, the real force behind the royal treachery, and Janet Hayatshahi makes the most of this deliciously curdled character. Her wild eyes and unnerving smile form a rictus of misery for Macbeth (and pretty much everyone around him), but Hayatshahi makes it clear why he is drawn in even as he finds her coldness repulsive.

The first hint of this production's stylized sensibility comes with the witches who pronounce to Macbeth their fateful (and self-fulfilling) prophecies. They are swathed in white, with veils over their faces, and they glide onto the stage with an ee-

DATEBOOK

"Macbeth"

8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 7 p.m. Sundays, through March 21

St. Cecilia's Playhouse, 1620 Sixth Ave., downtown

\$18-20
(619) 544-1484

rie, Kabuki-esque deliberateness.

These are some seriously twitchy witches — it sometimes seems as if they're being prodded with electric shocks from the underworld. Their presence is heralded by Jeff Mockus' haunting music, which permeates the whole show and adds to the overall sense of claustrophobia that's so expertly calibrated here by director Kirsten Brandt.

In Shakespeare's time, female characters generally were played by men. Brandt, also Sledgehammer's artistic director, turns the tables by casting several women in male roles.

It works, partly because the women are convincing as warriors, but also because it indi-



David Tierney as Macbeth and Janet Hayatshahi as his lady descend into a bloody hell of their own making as Sledgehammer Theatre takes on the Bard. *Jerry Rife / Union-Tribune*

rectly deprives the Lady Macbeth character of a gender-specific sting. She's no longer an archetypal conniving female, but just another ambition-addled striver trying in vain to slake her mania for pow-

er.

The female factor does add a new level of curiosity, though. This may be the only staging of "The Scottish Play" in which you'll see Macbeth kiss his buddy Banquo (evocative Laura Lee Juliano) full on the lips.

The costuming is a more complicated issue: Mary Larson has the cast dressed in looks that range from Abercrombie to geek chic to "Mad Max." Mad Mac himself looks like a commando, which seems fitting, since he's constantly at

war — mostly with himself.

Putting noble King Duncan in a red-velour warm-up suit is a tougher one to figure. But this is Sledgehammer, after all, and it would be a lot more shocking if the production went all Elizabethan on us.

Brandt does some very nice things with the text, rearranging and conflating scenes and dialogue for visceral impact. There's a chilling moment, shortly after Duncan is slain, where Macbeth gives a speech while his wife — high up in Nick Fouch's creepily stark set — echoes his words, ghostlike.

Another scene, in which the nobleman Macduff (a stalwart Donald McClure) learns his family has been killed, is repositioned to occur as the murders are happening, in a kind of split-screen effect that conveys the horror of the moment.

"Something wicked this way comes," say the witches on Macbeth's approach. Sledgehammer's take on the play — and Tierney's take on Macbeth — leaves the wickedness intact, but with a layer of intelligence that makes watching this play anything but toil and trouble.

Author: William Shakespeare. **Director:** Kirsten Brandt. **Sets:** Nick Fouch. **Lighting:** David Lee Cuthbert. **Costumes:** Mary Larson. **Original music/sound design:** Jeff Mockus. **Cast:** David Tierney, Janet Hayatshahi, Laura Lee Juliano, Donald McClure, Ruff Yeager, Lisel Gorell-Getz, Monique Gaffney, Brianne Kostelney, Jeremiah M. Maestas.

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