

by John J. Miller

National Review Online, The Corner

The real reason for my visit to Staunton yesterday was to see a play at the American Shakespeare Center. Washington, D.C. is home to some of the best Shakespeare in the world, but my favorite company is based in the improbable location of little Staunton, which isn't near much of anything but is home to the Blackfriars Playhouse, a reproduction of an indoor theater that Shakespeare himself would have recognized.

I took my 13-year-old son to see *Macbeth*. School has exposed him to a little bit of Shakespeare, but he hadn't seen a full production by professionals. Also, *Macbeth* is the perfect first play for boys: The story is easy to follow, it's short, and it's really violent. *Macbeth* and Lady *Macbeth* have a thing for each other, but this is no star-crossed-lovers nonsense. That's for girls. If you want boys to like Shakespeare, skip the teen romance and bring on the witches, swords, and gore.

To my delight, this production featured one of the most creative textual adaptations I've ever seen on stage. I'm not going to spoil it, except to say that it occurs in Act 4, Scene 2—the one in which Macduff's family is murdered. Right before Macduff's young son is stabbed to death, he yells: "He has killed me, mother/Run away, I pray you." The black humorist in my always has found this line funny, especially the tense. "He has killed me"? Really? About 20 years ago, my wife and I saw a production of *Macbeth* on stage in Stratford, Ontario—and the apparent absurdity of this line has been one of the longest running jokes of our marriage.

Well. The folks in Staunton have a brilliant interpretation of it. They don't drop or alter the line, as I would be tempted to do as a director. Instead, they embrace it. I remember thinking: "Oh here it comes, that silly line." Then it came and my jaw dropped.

In one sense, what they did was a small thing that hardly makes or breaks the production. I would have enjoyed yesterday's *Macbeth* without it. But what they did was sheer genius—the type of thing that shows why one staging of a great play is never enough.

No, I won't say what they did. The play is on tour until the summer. If you have a chance, check it out.

So, What Did I Do?

No, really. What did I do? I don't remember. That was my first thought when I read the review.

I worked on this production of *Macbeth* (directed by Jim Warren) at the American Shakespeare Center in summer 2010. The production went on national tour in the fall and then returned to Staunton to play at the Blackfriars Playhouse through spring/early summer 2011. Time had passed and I had worked on other productions and projects during that year. Further, I've worked on more than one production of *Macbeth* in my career—I had to file through my mental play catalogue to imagine the director, the actors, the rehearsal process...

And then it hit me: I remembered what I did.

I should note that Shakespeare's characters often claim to be dead, so it isn't an unusual staging challenge to come up against. It certainly is a challenge, but not an unusual one. And, because each production is different in concept and actor skill, it can't always be solved the same way. The process is a collaborative effort between the director, actors and fight director.

First Murderer: Where is your husband?

*Lady Macduff: I hope, in no place so unsanctified
Where such as thou mayst find him.*

First Murderer: He's a traitor.

Son: Thou liest, thou shag-hair'd villain!

*First Murderer: What, you egg!
Young fry of treachery!* [Stabbing him]

Son: He has kill'd me, mother: Run away, I pray you! [Dies]

[Exit LADY MACDUFF, crying 'Murder!'] [Exeunt MURDERS, following her.]

In Act IV, scene 2, the director armed Macduff's young son with a toy sword and early in the scene we see the boy to be verbally and physically precocious. Lady Macduff, who has just learned her husband has fled from Scotland, informs her son that he no longer has a father and challenges him to account for how he will carry on. The boy (he has no name in the play...) knows his father is not really dead—so the exchange is “playful” and serves to empower the boy: he talks of being fearless and being able to survive on his own. He also learns the fate of traitors and those who lie.

When the murders enter the room, the scene shifts for Lady Macduff from play to reality. But in this production, the boy does not make that shift (or is too innocent to truly understand the gravity of the situation) and, when one of the murderers names Macduff as a traitor, the boy accuses him of lying and draws his toy sword in serious challenge. The surprised murderer takes delight in this and engages in roughhousing with the boy during which the murderer dramatically stabs the boy with the toy sword. As the boy acts like he has been mortally wounded he begins speaking the line “*He has kill'd me, mother*”... it is at this point that the murderer actually stabs the boy. It is also at this point that the boy makes a shift to reality (or maturity...) as he looks toward his mother and finishes the line: “*Run away, I pray you!*”