

Review of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (directed by Johan Simons for Toneelgroep Amsterdam) at the Stadsschouwburg (City Theatre), Groningen, the Netherlands, 18 January 2013

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To this day, Shakespeare is the playwright most performed on the Dutch stage. His *Macbeth* is one of the 10 plays performed most regularly, averaging once every two to three years. The latest production was by theatre company Toneelgroep Amsterdam. This company is the largest repertoire theatre company of the Netherlands and has as its home the well-known Stadsschouwburg (City Theatre) of Amsterdam. The company, led by artistic director Ivo Van Hove, has as its core a fixed ensemble of 21 actors. It has an average of 20 productions and 350 performances each year, and is one of the most renowned and innovative companies of the Netherlands. A recent Shakespeare production of Toneelgroep Amsterdam was *Roman Tragedies* – a six-hour multi-media production, in which the audience was invited to walk around and sit on stage – including *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The production received very good reviews and toured through Europe, with three performances in 2009 at the Barbican in London.

The theatre for this production of *Macbeth*, directed by Johan Simons, renowned director for many Belgian, Dutch and German theatre companies, had a proscenium arch, which is customary in the main Dutch theatres. The text was based on the poetic translation by Hugo Claus (1929–2008), a highly respected Flemish author and playwright. As the audience filtered in for the production, they had to squint, as they were blinded by the auditorium's spotlights. At the rear of the stage stood an iron-framed stand around which some of the actors, most of whom were dressed casually in T-shirts and shorts, were seated. The other actors filtered in with the audience and took their seats on the stage. It was an obvious and deliberate reversal of roles, with the actors as the audience and vice versa, that immediately set the tone for the production. What the audience was about to see would not so much be about the character Macbeth: this production would be about us, the audience, about the man we could and, indeed, would turn into ourselves, if we let go of our control. The audience, not Macbeth, stood accused. When Macbeth declared "My name is Macbeth, / The most horrible name in Hell", the reversal of roles highlighted that it would not so much be his horror that we would confront, but our own potential for it.

However, the clarity of this opening quickly disappeared. The relatively bare set (figure 1) and a central square in front of it on which the action took place directed our

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Figure 1. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Fedja van Huêt and Chris Nietveld). Photograph: Jan Versweyveld.

attention to the actors' words. However, what spoke to us most was the powerful visual imagery of the action even though much of it remained unintelligible. Secondly, many of the words and sentences added to Claus' translation were cryptic at best, creating chaos or distraction instead of enlightenment. Thirdly, the use of only six actors for all roles necessitated a fair amount of doubling. Although in itself doubling need not complicate a story-line and can even be used to good effect in drawing parallels between characters or themes, in this production, the minimal number – if any – of costume changes created serious confusion as to which role an actor or actress was playing at a given time. The witches, for example, were simultaneously played by the actors who also played Macbeth and Banquo, so they ended up answering their own questions. Unless one was already quite familiar with the story, which is not the case in the Netherlands, this made the action on stage difficult to understand. All in all, there was a tremendous amount of energy and action on stage, with impressive visual imagery and fascinating textual changes, but the rationale for what was happening on stage often remained unclear. In this sense, the production followed in the tradition of many Dutch productions since the 1970s, when a stronger focus on visual and physical spectacle gained dominance.

In some respects, the production, while remaining shrouded in mystery, still managed to drive home not only a powerful visual spectacle, but also a central unifying theme. Before the killing of Macduff, Lady Macbeth appeared on stage for about a minute, but said nothing. With her back to the audience, she could be seen trembling against sounds of machine gun fire. Then the stage fell silent as Macbeth entered the arena, sitting down and watching his wife. The imagery in itself was striking, but the meaning remained shrouded in mystery. Next Macbeth said "I will murder Macduff" while walking around the stage, counting from 1 to 75, sometimes shouting, and at other times in a normal tone



Figure 2. Macbeth (Fedja van Huêt) and Birnam Wood. Photograph: Jan Versweyveld.

of voice, for no apparent reason. After the performance, I asked five audience members (two women who were regular theatre-goers, two men who were not, and another woman, a regular theatre-goer who also knew *Macbeth* quite well) if the counting meant anything to them. Their guesses varied; some thought that it was the number of people murdered by Macbeth, others thought that it had something to do with mass murder more generally, and others thought that it was meant to work up to an emotional internal climax. Two of the audience members speculated that 45 might refer to the end of World War II, while another argued that 75 might then refer to the end of the Vietnam War. However, in spite of the ambiguity of what was happening on stage, the scene made a powerful impression on the audience. In this respect, all audience members were in agreement: the scene was praised as extremely provocative, to the point of being making them uncomfortable, as aggressive, visually striking and emotional. While the exact meaning might not be clear, the manner in which it pulled the audience into a vortex of uncontrollable violence was unforgettable. A production in this vein would stand or fall with the acting and emotional strength of the main characters and obviously instrumental in this was the strong acting of Fedja van Huêt in the title role, one of the most famous Dutch actors today, and whose acting in this production was hailed as setting “Olympic standards” (figures 1, 2 and 3).

In other scenes, Macbeth, Banquo and Macduff hurled bags full of blood across the podium, or lots of huge conifers (figure 2), which not only created a huge mess on stage, but also had the audience perplexed. At the same time, the visual impact was that of blood and chaos. While one might argue that the text is a slightly overrated vehicle of meaning in theatre productions, in this production it definitely took second place, and strikingly enough this did not undermine the overall impact. Another fascinating, but unclear image on stage was created when Macbeth delivered his famous “Tomorrow, and



Figure 3. Macbeth (Fedja van Huêt). Photograph: Jan Versweyveld.

tomorrow, and tomorrow” speech. First, the death of the queen was announced on stage, and next she could be seen crawling around side-stage, while Macbeth spoke his monologue. During this speech she gave a list of animals, such as “bat, beetle, crow, worm, vulture, bear, tiger”. The possible meaning of this textual addition seems somewhat clearer; after all, they are all animals which are associated with death or decay, and as such a logical sideline to Macbeth’s monologue following the death of his wife. However, two of the five audience members did not catch the reference; the other three mentioned they had no idea what these animals had in common. Once again, however, the scene made a strong visual and emotional impact and conveyed Macbeth’s remorse beautifully.

Perhaps one of the strongest scenes was that immediately following the one between Macduff and Malcolm, when the death of his wife and children was announced. Lady Macbeth, who doubled as Lady Macduff, next entered stage and slowly peeled a transparent layer of artificial skin off her face, while in the background a violin could be heard as a slow song was sung. The scene lasted several minutes, once again without text, and was obviously laden with Freudian symbolism. It was unclear at first whether the character on stage was Lady Macbeth or Lady Macduff, but it did not really seem to matter. After a few minutes of this revolting stripping off of skin, she started repeating a few lines which contained phrases such as: “Obtain targets, / Overcome obstacles, / Enlarge self-respect, / Control others, / Defend myself, / Rehabilitate ego, / Stimulate others, / Surprise, amuse, tempt.” In this case, all audience members agreed on the symbolism of a woman baring her soul, revealing her innermost feelings. At the same time, the peeling off of her skin completed the transformation of character to actress, who seemed to comment on the character Lady Macbeth. Right at the start the differentiation between character, actor, and audience had been diminished, when the audience was set

in the spotlights while entering the theatre, and this scene was one of the few steps in this process that made sense.

While much of the action and the words spoken on stage remained unclear or random, and there was little logical through line and clarity of characterisation was often missing, this did not seem to matter so much in this production. Even if one did not always know what was happening, the images shown on stage, the reiteration of an uneasy, uncomfortable, and often brutal presentation of violence, and the blurry borders between audience, characters and actors all drew our attention towards the inevitable horror of *Macbeth* (figure 3). Spectators became perpetrators, put in the spotlight themselves, repeated at the end of the production, and asked how far they would go. This production was not interested so much in *Macbeth* as one human being, but in human beings more generally. Like *Macbeth*, *Macduff* was a murderer, and the production showed the audience the inherent human potential for violence, and the consequence of that potential when left unchecked. This violence was never presented as blind or predestined – the witches never played any role as a determining factor, but were a mere mirror – but it was committed wilfully and decisively. The programme notes mentioned Andreas Brevnik's 2011 massacre in Norway, which was judged to be similarly extreme and well-considered, and this production wanted to confront us with the genetically installed violence in us. The only thing that we can do is control it. This *Macbeth*, with all its ambiguity, never deviated from the theme that *Macbeth* is the man we could be, the man, indeed, we would be, and with this message, powerfully driven home in this production, left the audience horrified at its own potential for violence.