

Macbeth

Brighton Shakespeare Company in association with The Treason Show

Genre: Classical and Shakespeare (<http://fringereview.co.uk/review/festival/fringereview-uk/?festivalgenre=classical-and-shakespeare>), Drama (<http://fringereview.co.uk/review/festival/fringereview-uk/?festivalgenre=drama>), Theatre (<http://fringereview.co.uk/review/festival/fringereview-uk/?festivalgenre=theatre>)

Venue: St Nicholas' Church, Brighton
(<http://www.brightonshakespearecompany.co.uk>)

Festival: FringeReview UK (<http://fringereview.co.uk/review/festival/fringereview-uk/>)

Low Down

Brighton Shakespeare Company in association with The Treason Show, sponsored by Breeze & Associates are touring local Sussex churches, arriving at St Nicholas, Brighton for three nights. Mark Brailsford directs Macbeth. Designed by Ethel Merman, a beautifully naturalistic use of the sumptuous interior of the Eleventh-century-originating church (the century Macbeth is set in) contrast with an apparently simple screen which simplicity we later discover is deceptive. Lisebeth Lovelloyd makes effective unfussy use of costumes.

Review

Brighton Shakespeare Company in association with The Treason Show are touring local Sussex churches, arriving at St Nicholas, Brighton for three nights. After comedy at the Brighton Open Air Theatre Mark Brailsford directs *Macbeth* and seizes this lean-beef work famed for its economy and pace as much as its hurtling moral dissolution. Designed by Ethel Merman, apparently (everything doesn't come up roses though) naturalism scores: a sumptuous use of the Eleventh-century-originating interior (the century *Macbeth* is set in) contrasts with an apparently simple screen which simplicity we later discover is deceptive. Lisebeth Lovelloyd makes

effective unfussy period use of costumes and leatherwear. There's a raspy song of real swords, breastplate armour and helmets here.

With dense opening smoke and hallucinatory visuals we know we're in for no post-Harvesttide rendition. It begins in a dramatic entrance of the witches tearing down the aisle with a couple of small-scale pyrotechnic flourishes from one of them, Paul Zenon. This production contains outstanding elements alongside others still in development. Zenon's design of the Witches phantasmagoria and glowing pot return commandingly at the beginning of Act IV.

Ross Gurney-Randall's burly Macbeth strides commandingly with truculence and a whiff of his Henry VIII show attending him. He doesn't port the normal arms of a general, but a self-made strongman glinting humour. With an incisive delivery and keen intelligence behind the verse projection, his short-breathed delivery of some of it is often highly effective; very occasionally it misses a beat and he shies from the gravity of his character. Then something remarkable happens: this Macbeth coheres and he rises in stature to storm a furiously dark majesty at Dunsinaine.

Partly it's Sarah Mann's outstanding Lady Macbeth. Gurney-Randall gains in stature matched against her passionate still-sexualised, furiously conniving driver of ambition. Mann's vocal delivery is magnificent: her range of expression as in her great opening speech is characterised by complete use of her body and the space it's grounded in, pushing everything to an extremity. If this suggests an un-shaded performance that would be unjust, for although on occasion primary colours burn through, this is a variegated, enormously intelligent reading, colouring words to action and motivating by a flicker of caprice and rapid response to Macbeth scorning his hesitation. Again, her coping with Macbeth's fears up to and including Banquo's murder command different circumstances. Her transformation begins after speeding the guests: you see the exhausted collapse intimated.

The great sleepwalking scene is unattended by a doctor and gentlewoman and given the cast there was opportunity for it. It means that Mann has to act as if not overheard, and this solo, operatic *scena* allows her to bounce off less nuance and point – the perspective of overhearing gives it a more

chilling resonance, palpably terrifying the witnesses. Nevertheless Mann's performance recalls Alex Kingston's, than which no higher praise can be imagined. Her registers of warmth, chill, stark passion, resolution and furious scorn, as well as numbed devastation, are the highlight of the evening – but just as surely, not the only ones.

Another curious decision was made in removing Banquo's successfully-fleeing Fleance, though he's referred to after his father's murdered. Since three murderers are on hand (two are hired, three appear, a Shakespearean slip). Yet the murderers are well fleshed out, Sarah Widdas joining the excellent Paul Zenon and the outstandingly fine Jack Kristiansen who's also fight arranger. This luxury-cast scene highlights the unbalancing in parts when these two, also Witches and Lennox and Ross respectively, take up small parts. Kristiansen's vocal projection, actions and even the small nugget of Ross's anguish are taken with more than professional distinction.

Widdas too as well as Gentlewoman Third Murderer and Mentieth delivers a particularly fearful even terrified Lady Macduff. Like Mann her shriek behind the screen rends the air sealing a briefer set of performances where she varies pitch to each character, in her case not so far short of Kristiansen's qualities.

Stuart Barham's King Duncan then Macduff begins with appropriate stateliness though his Macduff latterly gains cubits bouncing off Robin Hodges as Malcolm and Kristiansen as Ross, and even more Gurney Randall's Macbeth. Barham's quieter nuances aren't yet quite as even as his louder ones and though shouting is often a refuge, here Barham manages a convincing rationale for his outburst, calibrating it up by vocal ratchets for the ice-cold Malcolm's testing of him. When he has to dispute it like a man as well as feel it, you see Barham rise to his Macbeth-slaying stature.

Hodges is less obvious as Banquo because younger than the part should be: Malcolm's more within range and though projection will develop he again rises to the finale scene convincingly.

Kerren Garner was perhaps under-used simply as a Witch (perhaps as Fleance she might have shone too, and as a gentlewoman or doctor in

the sleepwalking scene). Director Brailsford is as you'd expect consummate as the Porter, and good as the very different personal valet to Macbeth, sick-hearted Seyton, all hesitation and flee.

The finest spectacle, apart from Kristiansen's fight arrangements, is the second encounter with the Witches. Smoke and dry ice give way to the screen now illumined with different faces as potent, malign spirit masters, including Brailsford's ten-year old daughter Molly. Her appearance as one of the spirits called forth by the Witches, is shudderingly convincing.

Consummate as Kristiansen and Zenon are beside Garner, it seems perverse not to use the excellent Widdas and indeed Mann as Witches too, or at least Widdas. As played here it cuts down the womens' input, and we've long grasped the gender nettle: male Witches can darkly thrill. Yet Kristiansen and Zenon play the roles straight and edge no special haggish insight, fine as they are. Granted they're under-employed given their qualities, this seems a clunky compensation. Kingston also doubled as Witch, and it's often proved a fruitful doubling for Lady Macbeth.

Brailsford's direction is pacey, keen and shoots through the play including interval in two hours fifteen minutes. There are trimmings - some unnecessary, since it's such a pared-down text to begin with. But overall its great strength is framing a couple of outstanding performances and three or four more very fine ones around one superb design coup.

This is a Scottish Play to relish for its supernatural and natural scenes, and women supremely Mann, its unusually-edged but convincingly-won Macbeth and superbly-taken small roles. As the chilly and barren Malcolm stabs the traitor's head you see the bubbles of the earth doubling Scotland's trouble.

Published November 11, 2016 by Simon Jenner
(<http://fringereview.co.uk/author/simonjenner16/>)