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Antaeus Company: That Cursed (but Extraordinary) Scottish Play

Garner Simmons · Thursday, July 12th, 2012

Written more than 400 years ago, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* carries a curse as old as the play itself. Tradition has it that Shakespeare created the drama as a way of ingratiating himself to the newly crowned James I of England (formerly James VI of Scotland). A descendent of Banquo (the Thane murdered at Macbeth's behest in Act III) James also had published the book *Deamonologie* (1597) and fancied himself an authority on witchcraft. Thus we probably shouldn't be surprised to learn he was troubled by a play that opens with the incantations of three Witches and by Act IV provides us a recipe for casting a spell:

"…Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and caldron bubble.
Fillet of fenny snake
In the caldron boil and bake
Eye of newt and toe of frog
Wool of bat and tongue of dog…"

Supposedly the play so upset James that he forbade it to be performed for five years. But it is a testament to the play's power that despite this royal condemnation, it has continued to be staged ever since.

Which brings me to the exceptional production that has just opened at the Antaeus Theater in North Hollywood. You may think you know this play. But as brilliantly performed by the Antaeus Company under the direction of Jessica Kubzansky the play takes on new life. It is an original and imaginative performance that will take your breath away.

Right from the start, the play catches us by surprise. Instead of the traditional opening with the three weird sisters meeting on the heath before the battle, Kubzansky stages an imagined silent prologue in which a grief stricken Macbeth and Lady Macbeth lay to rest their dead infant son. Thus in a single stroke we are given a critical insight into the motivation behind what drives this tortured couple. Caught up in a brutal and unfair world, they are stripped of family and bound by fate. So later when Macbeth waivers at the thought of killing the king, we suddenly understand the deeper meaning of Lady Macbeth's harrowing speech: "…I have given suck and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me. / I would, while it is smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out had I so sworn as you / Have done to this…"

The acting is first rate throughout as the action moves at a martial drumbeat, one scene flowing

into the next so seamlessly that the play never flags, even for a moment. In true Shakespearean fashion, the company takes what might be seen as a limiting space and turns it into the vivid reimaging of medieval Scotland from rooky wood to stony battlement.

Given the wealth of actors in this troupe, the play is double-cast. In fact, we had gone to see Peter Van Norden who plays Duncan/Slaton only to discover the evening's performance involved the alternative cast. Finding Peter in the audience, he apologized for the confusion and pointed out that each cast provides it's own subtle shadings. Therefore one might see more than one performance and come away with fresh insights each time. Our solution, of course, will be to see the play again.

Credit must go to co-artistic directors Bill Brochtrup, Rob Nagle (whose interpretation of Macbeth was excellent on the evening we attended), and John Sloan for their creative leadership. Technical kudos must go as well to Scenic Designer Tom Buderwitz, Costume Designer Jessica Olsen, Lighting by Jeremy Pivnick, and sound design by John Zalewski. All make for a stunning evening in the theater. The play runs Thursdays through Sundays through August 26th. I urge you not to miss this remarkable evening of hurly-burly on the boards.

Performance info here.

Image: Bo Foxworth, Fran Bennett, Elizabeth Swain, Susan Boyd Joyce in Macbeth. Photo by Daniel Blinkoff.

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