

Reviews

Theatre

Inexorable descent

Macbeth

The Swan,
Stratford-on-Avon

★★★★★

Hang out the banners! Stratford has come up with its best Macbeth since Trevor Nunn's legendary production a quarter of a century ago. Gregory Doran's version thrusts the play into a modern, militaristic society without diminishing its theatricality while Antony Sher and Harriet Walter perfectly trace the psychological arc of the Macbeths in their inexorable descent into madness and guilt.

From the moment we see Macbeth and Banquo, in battle-fatigues and berets, carried shoulder-high by ra-ra soldiers it is clear that we are in a world that exalts military might: one in which the sainted Duncan seems like a medieval anachronism. But although Doran's production has echoes of Iraq, Serbia or Rwanda, it does not attempt to squeeze the play into an iron concept.

Instead it leaves the modern parallels hanging in the air while demonstrating the play's unstoppable momentum and theatrical power.

But the evening is driven by character as much as plot. And what is astonishing about Sher's Macbeth is the huge journey it undergoes. At first he is the supreme fighting machine whose eyes literally start in their sockets at the witches' prediction of

kingship. But his downright scorn for vaulting ambition is overcome by a mixture of base opportunism and macho pride: he can take anything from Lady M, but accusations of cowardice.

Like Olivier and McKellen, Sher endows Macbeth with a black humour so that even Banquo's Ghost is received with mocking incredulity.

Harriet Walter is no less stunning a Lady Macbeth. She combines outward graciousness, sufficient for Duncan to solemnly hand her his crown, with a myopic fixity of purpose that allows her to wrest the daggers from her husband's reluctant hand.

Marginalised by power, she also acquires the pathos of internal exile as she is excluded from her husband's counsel; and the sleepwalking scene, rather than a somnambulistic star turn, becomes a fearful exploration of her disordered sub-conscious.

Michael Billington

Pop

Stolid as a rock

Chuck Prophet

Underworld, London

★★★★

In 1989 Chuck Prophet was the snake-hipped, guitar-slinging foil to Dan Stuart's punch-drunk sheriff in American rock'n'rollers Green On Red. Ten years on, Prophet pursues a fitful solo career to the delight of a religiously devoted few. Now 35, he betrays the lived-in stolidity of an Arsenal