

A rare witch project

OK, Macbeth's a great play.
But Antony Sher and Harriet
Walter make it sublime

THEATRE

Susannah Clapp



Macbeth Swan, Stratford
Collected Stories Theatre Royal,
Haymarket
Resident Allen Bush

GREGORY DORAN has directed a galvanising *Macbeth* for the RSC that is full of excitement and intelligence. The key to it is speed. And wraparound action. On a bare, darkened, smoky stage, to the insistent beating of drums – and an occasional underworldly twang – one scene punches after another without a break. You are made to feel with *Macbeth* that there is no going back; and to feel, with him and his wife, a recoil at this knowledge.

Everything is on the move: uncertain, equivocal. The opening words – the witches' curses – are spoken in darkness. What look like sturdy walls go bendy, as apparitions bulge out of them. When Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane it does so in such a crepuscular swirl that for a moment it really does appear as an eerie event, rather than as a few actors wagging twigs of privet.

The whole height and width of the Swan Theatre are used, with the slap of an actor's plimsoll only occasionally heard. Stephen Brimson Lewis's design puts a fat grey cumulus cloud hovering over the proceedings. In this roughly modern-dress version – grey combat trousers and great coats – the king appears aloft in the gallery, or promenading on a slab, crowned and golden-gowned, like an antiquated figure in an advent calendar. Lady Macbeth sleepwalks her way eerily down the long spiral staircase. The aisles are full of actors.

The seamlessness of all this has been intricately considered. Take the sequel to

the banquet scene. The Macbeths, having faced down one ghost and the alarm of their guests, go to their beds, giggling with nervous exhaustion. As they do so, the empty chairs topple over, as if struck by an unseen hand, and the table tips backwards – to show the three witches hanging from it, grinning like triumphant mis-ericords.

Add the fact that Stephen Noonan's skinhead porter, bobbing up from a trapdoor as if literally from hell, is both a period gargoyle and a skilful comic improviser, goading first-night critics, mimicking Tony Blair as an arch-equivocator.

But none of it would register if the central performances weren't powerful. As *Macbeth*, Antony Sher articulates decisive moments in the drama in his singularly intelligent manner. When he declares after the announcement of Duncan's murder that 'from this instant/There's nothing serious in mortality', he signals a switch in the play and in his performance, from the driven to the sardonic.

When he dismisses life as a tale told by an idiot, he walks off the stage into the audience, with a flourish of disdain, as if also renouncing all theatrical attempts at description. He uses his extraordinary ability for physical transformation, stumping across the stage – the stocky, military, ungraceful opposite of his naturally lithe self. And he slips easily into the black humour of the play: 'Twas a rough night,' he explains, the morning after he's bumped off the king.

His performance is one of revelatory single moments. But it's strained. You're always conscious of what he's doing: being bug-eyed at



Antony Sher and Harriet Walter in *Macbeth* at the Swan, Stratford. Photograph by Neil Libbert

'As Lady Macbeth she swings into madness on the creaky hinge of marriage. She is wonderful'

the weird sisters, fracturing his speeches.

It is Harriet Walter, as Lady Macbeth, who gives the transcendent performance. She traces a perfect arc as the anxious, over-protective mate. She begins as a generous partner: poised, elegant, wanting the best for her husband, reading the predictions of his success like a school report. She glides into becoming a Valkyrie when she summons spirits to make her cruel: she does so not with the ease of someone beckoning her consorts, but as one who needs an injection of cruelty.

She grimaces with nervousness when she greets the king; she gasps as she takes the daggers from her husband. She swings into madness on the creaky hinge of her marriage. She is

wonderful.

The most irritating thing about *Collected Stories* is that it is a waste of two acting talents: one established but insufficiently seen, and one burgeoning. Helen Mirren exerts her habitual complicated strength at the Theatre Royal Haymarket; Anne-Marie Duff is impressively ambiguous. But Donald Margulies's play is a drab thing. There's a confusion at the centre of the play, a variation on *All about Eve* in which a middle-aged US professor (Mirren) sees her literary success outstripped by that of her worshipping pupil.

Margulies has intertwined this tale of painful jealousy between generations with an examination of literary theft. The young author bases her first novel on confidences

about her mentor's early life: the older woman regards this as a betrayal. Margulies explains that he has been inspired by the real-life clash between the writer David Leavitt and Stephen Spender – whom Margulies weirdly supposes to have been Poet Laureate.

Both these strands are potentially interesting, but underdeveloped. And they don't belong together. A new generation of writers supersedes an earlier not by being flatteringly similar but by being woundingly different.

This wouldn't matter so much if it was possible to believe that these characters were likely to have written something, rather than have expended their efforts on projecting themselves as writers. There's some embarrassing name-dropping – 'Ed' Doc-

torow rings up. There's some stagey establishing of literary credentials: one student is cheaply dismissed as being like an Anita Brookner character – which seems to be shorthand for wearing a cardigan. But no line of dialogue suggests either character has ever sat alone in a room trying to put sentences together; no exchange suggests either of them has an individual voice. And there's no sense in Howard Davies's stodgy production of when any of this is happening.

Why, in what the programme tells us is the mid-Nineties, is Helen Mirren using an antiquated typewriter. Is it because she's a spinster, and so unable to cope with contemporary life? Is it because she's projecting herself as a Bloomsbury? Most people will be too cross to care.

At the Bush, Bette Bourne is making himself up as Quentin Crisp. This is partly a matter of slap and partly a matter of sentences.

He puts on a lot of mascara, and a bit of blusher. He produces good – sometimes irritating, sometimes true, always well-turned – phrases. He wears hair as puff as candy-floss, a gorgeous cream satin shirt and arms covered in bandages to prevent him clawing at his eczema and sending rivers of blood down the stairs and into the New York streets. In his book-encrusted room a tiny television flickers under the bedsheets. In the fridge sits one solitary egg: 'Who says life is devoid of possibilities?' And who, after this immaculate production by Mike Bradwell, could say that theatre is?

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