

Terrifying thrill of evil

ON THE page, *Macbeth* is surely the most atmospheric and terrifying of all Shakespeare's plays. In the theatre of the mind's eye, the witches, the marvellously evocative poetry of dusk and darkness, and Macbeth's terrible journey to the everlasting bonfire all raise the hairs on the back of the neck.

Live on stage, though, the play often proves a terrible disappointment. A plodding literalism takes the place of the imagination, and too often productions entirely miss the authentic thrill of evil and terror. This time, however, the Royal Shakespeare Company has finally got it right.

Gregory Doran's spare staging is played without an interval and hurtles along at tremendous, stomach-lurching speed. It's also performed in modern dress, and in its catalogue of horrors inevitably recalls the murderous strife in the former Yugoslavia.

Doran never labours specific parallels, however, creating instead an almost hallucinatory impression of brutality and horror that burns itself into the brain with the intensity of a bad dream. And the tension is constantly increased by Adrian Lee's deeply unsettling percussive score.

Almost all the action is set in either half-light or murky darkness. The killing of Banquo takes place in the beam of a single

Theatre

Macbeth

RSC/SWAN THEATRE
STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

torch, the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth is lit only by flickering candles. There are shadows everywhere, not least during the brilliantly staged killing of Duncan, with Macbeth and his wife conversing in tense, appalled whispers.

But if the production is often dark, Antony Sher makes a brilliantly lucid Macbeth. A short, squat figure, with a vein throbbing dangerously in his forehead, he looks every inch the thuggish warlord and his violence is terrible to behold.

But what Sher also captures is Macbeth's intelligence, his knowledge of just what he is doing and exactly how much it is going to cost him. Before the murder he specifically acknowledges the Christian grace of Duncan, and throughout he makes Macbeth's thoughts and emotions transparently clear in rapt, beautifully delivered soliloquies that make the audience uncomfortably complicit in his evil. Macbeth is a tragic hero, not just a villain, and Sher's achievement is to make you pity him even as you shudder at his deeds.

By the end he has turned not just Scotland but his own soul into a wasteland,

and his almost throwaway delivery of "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" is terrifying in its acknowledgement of all the futility and emptiness that lies within.

Sher is superbly supported by Harriet Walter as his haughtily aristocratic wife. What's terrifying here is that Walter combines alluring sexuality with an authentic touch of the psycho. I have never heard the vile "unsex me here" speech more chillingly delivered, and it is clear that as she screws her husband's courage to the sticking place, they're both getting a real sexual buzz out of it.

Among the supporting cast, Joseph O'Connor seems to radiate goodness as Duncan, and Ken Bones makes a powerful, brooding Banquo. Stephen Noonan plays the porter with the spiteful intensity of a particularly bolshie alternative comedian, while Nigel Cooke is deeply moving as Macduff, desperately trying to keep his emotion in check when he learns of the death of his wife and children.

After Nigel Hawthorne's desperately disappointing *King Lear*, it is a real relief to find the RSC back in such strong form with this notoriously difficult play.

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