



Antony Sher (right) leading the cast in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 'Macbeth', with Harriet Walter and Ken Bones Geraint Lewis

A Macbeth propelled forward to glory by a dark Lady of suppressed hysteria

GREG DORAN's production of *Macbeth*, starring Antony Sher and Harriet Walter, moves with the murderously incisive swiftness of a slasher's knife.

Sweeping by in just 130 minutes without an interval, it offers an object lesson in the difference between mere speed and exciting momentum.

Everything seems genuinely and nightmarishly impelled forward by what precedes it. Doran's staging may cloak the stripped-back Swan Theatre in darkness but its own sane intelligence shines out from the hero's first appearance.

Often when *Macbeth* and Banquo arrive on stage from the supposed heat of battle to encounter the witches, you feel

FIRST NIGHT

MACBETH,
SWAN THEATRE,
STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

that they've emerged from nothing more strenuous or unhinging than a brisk round of golf.

Not here, dressed in mud-caked modern combat gear. Sher's *Macbeth* and Ken Bones' Banquo enter hoisted like heroes on the shoulders of their chanting comrades and mad-eyed, laughingly gung-ho.

Sher lets you see that, for *Macbeth*, this virtual civil war in Scotland has been a de-

ranging yet liberating experience. The battle has shown that hierarchy can be questioned and this has uncorked the dreadful genie of his ambition.

You quickly see, too, the way that the *Macbeths'* marriage is reignited by the vertiginous prospect of snatching the crown.

Borne along on the wayward current of her lonely nervous energy, Harriet Walter is the best Lady *Macbeth* I've seen since Judi Dench. The heroine's suppressed hysteria, the erotic relief she finds in collaborative violence are at once ruthlessly unsentimentalised by Walter's performance and achingly sad.

She washes the dirt of war-

fare off her husband as though he were the little boy she no longer has.

And, at the end of the scene where Banquo's ghost, here conjured up purely by Sher's crazed reactions, disrupts the dinner party, she subsides into terrible little sobbing laughs that seem to be ripped from her by the roots.

Sher gives, by comparison, a technically accomplished but rather external-seeming performance. Even before the psychological consequences of their crime push them on to separate paths, this *Macbeth* seems insufficiently connected to his spouse.

There are some excellent creepy effects, not least when

the young drunken Liverpudlian porter lets rip with a mean impersonation of Tony Blair. The apparitions bulge through cement patches in the back wall, their features masked and straining like stocking-faced terrorists.

Shudderingly, *Macbeth's* reaching for the invisible dagger is echoed in the climactic dual with Nigel Cooke's sign Macduff as he impotently struggles to disarm his nemesis. Only here, the dagger is all too real and ends up in the hero's guts.

By and large, then, a richly rewarding reading of a tragedy that is notoriously difficult to pull off.

PAUL TAYLOR