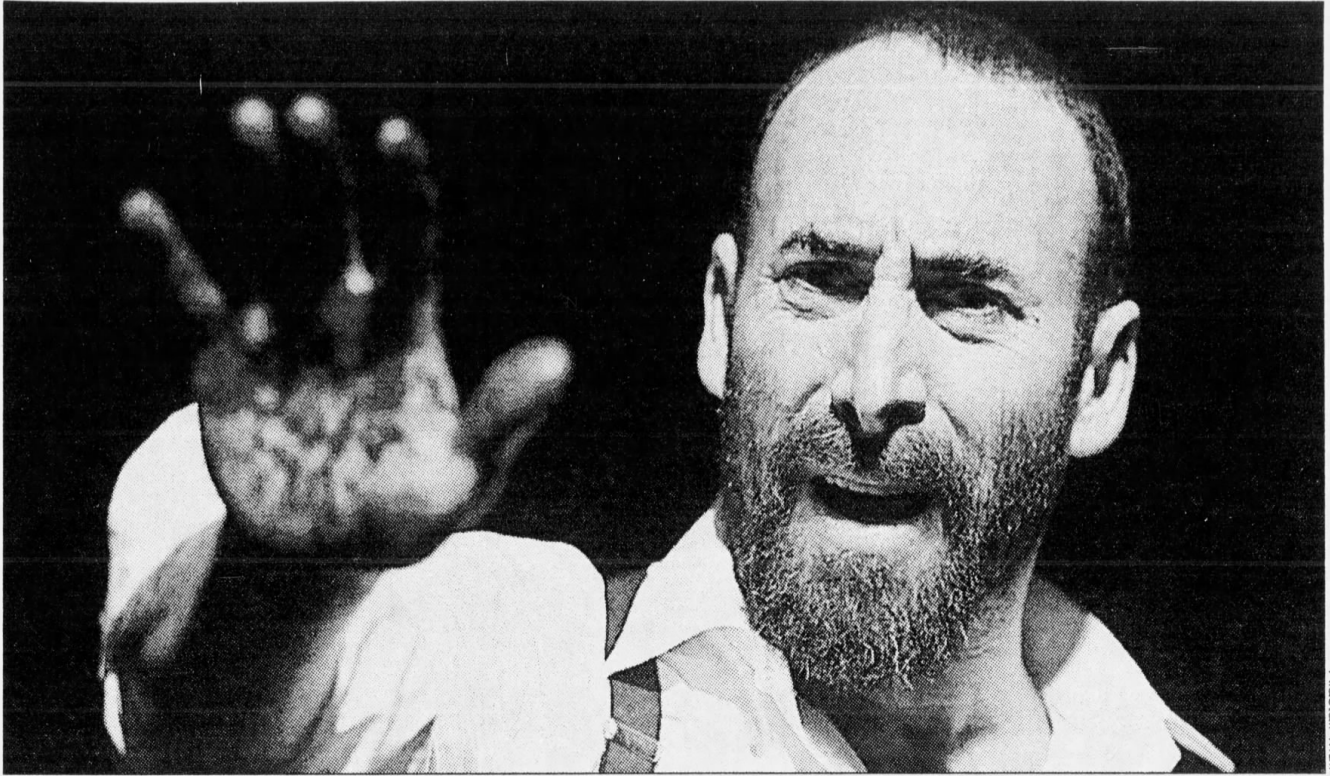




Alastair Muir

The eyes have it: Antony Sher in typically demonstrative mood as Macbeth at the Young Vic

Macbeth's modern vision

ANTONY SHER'S amazing, eloquent eyes, which he seems able to make large at will, acted his other vital bits and pieces off the stage last night, when his modern, Marine-Commander Macbeth arrived in London. Those swivelling irises register wide-eyed shock and surprise as witches, ghosts and apparitions go about their warning business. I missed Sher's performance at Stratford last November, when he and Gregory Doran's production won mainly delighted reviews. But although admiring of Sher's eye-work, Doran's thrilling vision of Macbeth the play seems far more imaginative than the star's title-role performance.

Doran sets his crepuscular production in a militaristic Christian society spanning ancient and modern worlds. Stephen Brimson Lewis's bare stage design offers both drawbridge and spiral stairs. Sher's Macbeth and Ken Bones's inscrutable Banquo, first appear astride the shoulders of chant-

MACBETH ★ ★

Young Vic

Nicholas de Jongh

ing troops. Both muddled men, in fatigues and berets, could be veteran marines. When, though, Macbeth prostrates himself in front of Trevor Martin's King Duncan, the gesture looks primitive. Locating the play in a no-man's land, with guns and swords, dressing gowns and monarchical worship, sharpens the play's evocation of evil and foreboding.

Directed at pace, the production is shot through with magnificently gauged shock-effects, whose impact is heightened by the sinister atmospherics of Adrian Lee's musical score. From the first thunder-claps and the cries of the preposterously melodramatic witches, the tension is finely strung.

Sher sadly lacks the right stuff to play warrior or action-man, though he valiantly flexes his vocal muscles and gives them histrionic exercise. His Macbeth succumbs to self-consciousness, goaded by apparitions, Banquo's invisible ghost and Harriet Walter as his spouse.

Miss Walter daringly presents Lady Macbeth in the grip of a near nervous-breakdown from the first. Her nerves jangle with far more dramatic conviction than those of her murder-bound husband, even before the pitiful hysterics of her sleep-walking scene. The production's most devastating effects spring from the idea that the witches seem lodged in Macbeth's mind. After the banquet, chairs fall back, the table shudders and overturns, disclosing beneath it the writhing witches who ensure Nigel Cooke's pained MacDuff will restore John Dougall's Duncan to the throne. A production to savour.

● Until 3 June. Box Office: 020 7928 6363.

Macbeth de Jongh Standard

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