

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Silent 'Macbeth' in Manhattan, a Vodka-Charged One in Brooklyn

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The basement cabaret space at the SoHo Playhouse is not a large room, so it isn't possible to be very far from the action. Still, at "Macbeth Muet," a 50-minute frolic through tragedy from the Montreal-based company La Fille du Laitier, you wouldn't want to be at a front-row table. Too much risk of getting spattered with flying blood (fake) or the innards of eggs (real).

"Muet" is French for "mute," and there is no dialogue in this inventive and oxygenating tiny-cast retelling of "Macbeth," one of two bold takes on the play that I saw this week. The other — Dzieci Theater's "Makbet," performed inside a metal shipping container in Bushwick, Brooklyn — left me a little dazed; more on that in a bit. But "Macbeth Muet," which I saw at the end of a wearying day, sent me back onto the street refreshed, energized and pretty charmed as well.

Part of the annual Fringe Encore Series, which presents favorites from fringe festivals around the world, "Macbeth Muet" is like a cross between a low-budget puppet show and a silent movie, with all the riffing silliness that suggests.

What's unexpected, and impressive, is the social and emotional acuity of this variation on Shakespeare's play. It's recommended for ages 13 and up, which sounds about right. Created by Marie H  l  ne B  langer and Jon Lachlan Stewart, who also directs, this production hasn't forgotten the essential role of sex in marriage, including the Macbeths'.

Such physical passion is part of the youthful vitality of the show, performed by J  r  mie Francoeur and Clara Pr  vost. Their whitened faces are in keeping with the production designer C  dric Lord's stark palette: black, white, blood-red. Also a tinge of pink, once Macbeth (Mr. Francoeur) and his lady (Ms. Pr  vost) have embraced murder as their path to the crown.

Macduff and Banquo are the main supporting characters, each played by a puppet of sorts: Macduff represented by a hockey glove (Lady Macduff is an oven mitt), Banquo by a foam plate with eyes (his wife is also a plate, but with lashes and a hair bow). The witches are folded-paper figures — black, of course.



Dzieci Theater's "Makbet" is performed inside a metal shipping container in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The eggs, by the way, represent children, and they may break your heart in a way you don't see coming.

The actors manipulate them all, and these simple objects prove versatile vessels for the show's whipsaw mood changes: comic or tender at one instant, brutal or woeful the next. Each switch is supported by Mr. Stewart's winking sound design, rife with pop-song samples.

Borrowing from the visual language of film, "Macbeth Muet" takes some of the form's storytelling liberties, too, cutting between present and past to explain how these characters got to their current situation. Flashbacks show each couple — the Macduffs, the Banquos, the Macbeths — meeting, falling in love and either starting a family or trying to. We watch the Macbeths, sweetly hopeful, harden with each loss they suffer.

Silent-movie-style placards, sparingly deployed, impart information at moments when text is vital. One is the famous warning to Macbeth, which he takes as reassurance: that "none of woman born shall harm" him. A flurry of placards also arrives near the end, cheekily explicating the loophole that leads to his vanquishment anyway. Otherwise, though, it is up to the audience to be familiar enough with "Macbeth" to follow as the actors briskly hit its highlights.

What rescues the show from mere cleverness is its overarching vision, made vivid in a final tableau that would be a spoiler to describe. In it, we see clearly the needless destruction that the power-mad leave in their wake, and it is revolting.

The Eastern-European-flavored "Makbet," in Brooklyn, is an altogether different experience, starting with its setting: a nonprofit recycling center called Sure We Can. The immersive prelude to this production begins outside, with audience and actors surrounded by tall piles of colorful bottles and cans wrapped in clear plastic.

The effect is oddly cheerful. The live accordion music helps with that, and so does the sustenance that the friendly performers offer around: perhaps a fat chunk of kielbasa "to fortify against dark magic?" Or, for the same purpose, a small shot of vodka? In old-country accents to match the fare, they insist that they distilled the vodka — which on Sunday afternoon was vanilla — out back.



The cast of “Makbet” after a performance. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

“We make it this morning, stepping on potatoes,” the leader of this clan (Matt Mitler, Dzieci Theater’s founder) told me. After he stomped a foot for comic effect, I drank the stuff.

The audience sat in a circle on overturned plastic crates and listened as Mr. Mitler channeled messages from the spirit world for anyone who asked. At the center of the circle was a garbage can, fire-blackened inside, and I suddenly thought how cozy it might have been for Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters, gathered around their caldron on a sunny late-summer day.

What I didn’t think, then or at any point, was that when we all got up and walked into a corrugated shipping container to watch the play, the door would be shut behind us, which it was. I’m not claustrophobic, but it was about 80 degrees out, and frankly it seemed a little dangerous.

More than that, though, it was distracting — because if sweat is coursing down your body while the air is steadily thickening, you are not in an optimal environment for theatergoing. We hadn’t been in there long when I wondered if this was the dark magic that the vodka and sausage had been meant to fortify against.

Mr. Mitler, who adapted, directed and designed the 90-minute show, is one of its three principals, along with Megan Bones and Yvonne Brechbuhler. They play nearly all of the roles, handing parts off to one another, sometimes in mid-speech. Whichever actor is wearing the red shawl at any given moment is Lady Macbeth; whoever dons the black hat with the red band is her husband. Other characters get their own costume signifiers, all of them pulled out of a big metal pot and clearly explained at the start.

It is a shadowy, dimly lit performance, with a chorus contributing atmospheric music. The ritual of storytelling is built into the staging, with some remarkably lovely movement sequences. But “Makbet” is vastly more interested in magic — the dark kind and the theatrical kind — than it is in the bloody struggle for the crown.

So there is no weight to its tragedy. It becomes merely an experiment in form.