

Theater Review

'Macbeth' in all of its bloody gore

"Macbeth" is one of the great bloody horror shows of all time. At one 1849 New York production the audience rioted, and 25 people ended up dead.

Now this cloud of terror is drifting up the Peninsula. Last weekend San Francisco Shakespeare performed its summer touring production of "Macbeth" at the beautiful lakeside amphitheater in Cupertino's Memorial Park.

This coming weekend the same miasma of treachery, pain, cruelty and insane vengeance floats northward to Redwood City, where the show will run outdoors on the grounds of Sequoia High School for three weekends.

All performances are free. There is no intermission, so this shortest of Shakespeare's plays is a

straight 100-minute shot, the length of a movie.

In "Macbeth" dueling feudal lords duke it out for the title of king, hacking to death their best friends along the way. It all ends badly. Very badly.

Tension and violence

Director Ken Kelleher has mounted a lucid modern dress production, on a black stage, with occasional blood-red highlights in clothing, masks or smeared murder gore. Sound designer Matt Stines' appropriately cacophonous but lyrical sound plot includes



LADY MACBETH is played by Emily Jordan in Free Shakespeare in the Park's 2013 production of "Macbeth." Photo by John Western.

one Argentine tango — a dance by cast members that focuses the play's tension and violence.

Among the actors Emily Jordan is chilling immediately on entrance as psycho Lady Macbeth, determined to advance her husband's career by hatching to death their overnight house guest. Michael Ray Wisely is compelling as her warlord husband — alternately ambitious, analytical, earnest, fearful, regretful, humble, angry, and then finally, suicidally enraged.

This murderous couple has strong scenes together, psyching up for the big kill, and later yo-yoing back and forth between courage and paralyzing fear.

"Macbeth's" famous witches are styled as teenage girl-ghouls from "Carrie," although their lines are spoken from prerecorded audio tracks, which is only a partial success, as it flattens the sense of character on stage. There is also early sound muddiness, which may hinder those new to the play.

Elsewhere there are some split scenes, where the director has chosen to play two scenes at once, alternating segments back and forth. The goal is to show simultaneity of action and thus add irony, but it's hard to improve on Shakespeare's sense of dramatic juxtaposition.

'Witchipedia'

A 15-minute preshow "Witchipedia" performed by talented members of SF Shakes' student program gives background on the play, explaining why superstitious actors believe the word "Macbeth" should not be spoken in a theater, fearing it will cause tragic bad luck.

Taking on numerous characters, the young actors provide information on how the play came into existence. It was written in reaction to royal power struggles that followed the death of childless Elizabeth I, who was eventually succeeded by Scottish King James VI, a witch-fascinated theater nut who encouraged the writing of new plays, and was redubbed English King James I.

This weekend's Redwood City show is free. SF Shakes also sponsors a variety of summer and fall Shakespeare camps for those as young as 4 years of age.

For information on location, parking, camps and school programs, visit sfshakes.org.

Email John Angell Grant at johnangellgrant@gmail.com.



**John
Angell
Grant**