

More Than Sound and Fury

by RL Nesvet

Macbeth: A Walking Shadow reviewed January 5, 2007

Macbeth is a play with ghosts, as everybody knows. The spirit of the just-murdered Banquo invades his murderer's feast, and Macbeth sees a ghostly dagger and, later, a line of apparitions of Scots both dead and not yet born. One character who isn't seen as a ghost is Macbeth himself. Until now.

In Andrew Frank and Doug Silver's new adaptation at Manhattan Theater Source, *Macbeth: A Walking Shadow*, the title character (Ato Essandoh) faces death almost as soon as the play begins. Then he haunts the scenes that follow—the past events that brought him to his precipice.



Ato Essandoh and Celia Schaefer as the Macbeths
 Photo Credit: Kate Sessions

The title is perfect for this adaptation. Macbeth walks as a shadow, or ghost, through his own history, as he is a dead man from its out-of-order beginning. This begs a question: Does fate make everyone a walking shadow if history is divorced from chronology? The production has a few flaws, but its many risky victories make it an interpretation you will not want to miss.

Essandoh gave an acclaimed lead performance in Seattle's Intiman Theater's adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Here, Essandoh creates a reckless yet vulnerable, indignant yet timid, haunted and haunting Macbeth. The man is a mass of contradictions, fighting as much with his many schizophrenic personae as with the escalating series of enemies he creates. Essandoh's often quiet yet clear voice strips the rusty bombast off the most famous speeches and lets us actually hear what Macbeth has been trying for centuries to say. When he ends up cursing life and fate, he is miles away in tone from the beginning. Or, given the nonlinear chronology, from the middle.

Other standouts in the cast include Chuck Bunting's Duncan, whose lack of charisma is anemic to the extreme; Lou Carbonneau's physically small yet limber, subtle, and ultimately enraged Macduff; and Michael Baldwin's alternately innocent and canny Malcolm.



Photo Credit: Kate Sessions

The sound design, by Andrew Bellware, is an almost continuous, complex, moody score, with a subtle Celtic influence. It gives the play the feel of an action movie. It is carefully synchronized with the action, and supports rather than overwhelms the most emotionally intense moments.

Making the banquet a stand-up cocktail affair is another inspired decision, lending the scene great physical dynamism. However, some adaptation and staging choices are illogical. Macbeth kills Duncan onstage, which is shockingly effective—but his victim is attacked standing up, which conflicts with

the account that Macbeth gives in the dialogue. The role of Donalbain, the younger of the two princes, has been cut, but Duncan still gestures behind him and introduces his "sons," plural.

Some of the witches are double-cast with the Scottish thanes, making them apparently male. This obscures the gender issue that is absolutely key to the plot. In the original, Macbeth's wife believes that she must be "unsexed" to commit regicide, and that if her husband doesn't help her, he is not a real man.

Of course, Shakespeare's company always cast men as women, but they indicated the characters' genders through costumes and acting. Here, an actress played the Thane of Ross without any attempt, in body language or dialogue delivery, to mark the character as male. Consequently, I wondered whether this fantasy Scotland has female warriors, and why, if that is the case, Lady Macbeth must lose her "sex" to kill.

There is some stage combat, with broadswords. The fighters looked very cramped in the narrow alley theater, and when they swung their swords in the audience's direction, a few spectators in the front row lurched backward in their seats.

With nods to Quentin Tarantino's nonlinear, music-heavy dramas of epiphany and revenge, this adaptation deconstructs Shakespeare's story instead of simply telling it. In Essandoh's performance, a vividly complete character rises from the fragments of his tale.

Bellware

Cast

Ato Essandoh as Macbeth
 Celia Schaefer as Lady Macbeth
 Lou Carbonneau as Macduff
 Len Childers as Banquo
 Michael Baldwin as Malcolm
 Chuck Bunting as Duncan, Servant 2, Witch
 Lex Woutas as Lennox, Witch
 Ridley Parsons as Soldier 1, Witch, Murderer
 Amy Dickenson as Ross / Witch
 James Becton as Soldier 2, Witch, Servant 2, Doctor
 Meghan Reilly as Lady Macduff