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Local Kids Shine in Cal Shakes' Macbeth

By Lou Fancher



Noah Baldwin as Fleance and Nicholas Pelczar as Banquo in Cal Shakes' Macbeth. Photo Kevin Berne

He swims on the Moraga Country Club team and compares how he feels in the water to how he feels on stage. "Sometimes when I do a race, I touch the wall (at the finish) and think, 'What happened?' I feel relaxed and very cool on stage, too." There's a suggestion of his being lost in these moments, and of liking it. Baldwin continues, mentioning agents and community theater with equal enthusiasm, before saying, "I'll let it take me wherever it takes me."

On stage, Macbeth takes both actors into director Joel Sass's mind-bending adaptation of the classic play. Baldwin, as Fleance, is fierce and busting for a fight, yet still projects the "cool" he claims to experience. Martin, playing MacDuff's son, has the enviable honor of circling the stage-dressed in bloodied rags and pulling a bright, red wagon-only to die a short time later. ("I don't get a sword," Martin says, "but I do get to die!")

Death is everywhere in the superb cast. But before annihilation, there's effortless acting, particularly from Nicholas Pelczar, Delia MacDougall and Stacy Ross. Pelczar makes the intricate language so understandable it's easy to overlook his verbal dexterity. MacDougall, in clever counter-gender casting by Sass, plays the Thane of Ross with vicious conviction. And Ross leans into every line-literally pressing onto tip-toe-becoming not only Lady Macbeth, but epitomizing the horrid, irresistible undertow that pulls Macbeth and all the others to the show's fatal conclusion.

Daniel Ostling's set, a stark tower, scrubbed, but never clean, suggests treachery and abandonment. And there's plenty of blood, from the smeary crosses adorning the chests of the three Wyrd Sisters to Macbeth's glistening, murderous hands. The final fight scene is, unfortunately, the only weak link in the production. With such force in the spoken lines, it's a surprise the stage fighting is feather-weight.

Still, there's much to recommend in the production. Shakespeare understood both fury and fun, and both are captured in Cal Shakes' Macbeth.

Samantha Martin and Noah Baldwin live on the edge. Joining the cast of California Shakespeare Theater's Macbeth, the young actors risk loss of blood, limbs and even life in William Shakespeare's dark, spiraling tale of murder and betrayal.

Sitting in the theater company's Berkeley offices a few weeks before opening night, it's hard to imagine suspense and suspicion oozing from the two Lamorinda kids. Especially when Martin, age 9, closes her eyes, inhales smoothly, and proceeds to sing a splendid rendition of "I Know It's Today." Her facial expression is fluid: alternating between bliss and determination. Martin is participating in the Orinda Idol contest and has the song well-rehearsed. "It's one of my favorites," she says, her eyes now open.

Baldwin is watchful too. At 13, he's more prone to self-observation, with a refreshing awareness unclouded by judgment. "I've been doing this since I was six," he says, of acting. Currently a student at Oakland School for the Arts, he has appeared at the Town Hall Theatre and with Diablo Theatre Company. His move to Cal Shakes was deliberate: "I wanted to do more stuff for my age group," he says. He's not talking YouTube, he's talking classics. "Cal Shakes feeds my knowledge for Shakespeare," he says. "Doing a show is almost like a school lesson. Saying 'that' with a 'd' on the end - It's hard to learn. It's a different language, almost."

Martin participated in the Cal Shakes summer camps before landing on the main stage this season. "We got to do Romeo and Juliet," she says. A vision of the young actor in a flowing gown on a balcony begins to form, then disappears in a flash when she says, "I like playing boys!" Her subsequent words arrive in a buoyant jumble: "Playing a boy is totally not me because I'm really girlie-girlie." She pauses, debating whether the term is over the top. "I like clothes and make-up-lots of lip gloss. I like making jokes. I like being prepared for the future." She's a horizontal roller coaster, swooping right and left between gender outlines.

Baldwin picks up a subject he's been pondering while Martin speaks.

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