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Cal Shakes closes its 2019 season with a powerful 'Macbeth' in Orinda

By Sophie Braccini



From left, Jomar Tagatac (Banquo) and Rey Lucas (Macbeth) Photo Kevin Berne

"It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing." The famous Macbeth quote resounds in the vast open space of the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda, where Cal Shakes is telling the tyrant's story, and suddenly it seems that the desperate words are aimed at us in our own difficult times. The last show of the season from the Berkeley troupe performing in Orinda is not Shakespeare's merriest; it is violent and bloody. Its relevance today and the excellence of the production make it a must-see event.

It has been told many times that the TV series "Game of Thrones" stole a lot from Shakespeare's characters. Nowhere better than in "Macbeth" can that be seen. Here are the thirst for power for power's sake, the senseless violence, the madness that comes with too much supremacy, something that has appealed to audiences all over the world since it is said to have premiered in front of King James of England in 1606.

Seeing the play live on stage adds to its impact and the direction by Victor Malana Maog does not hide anything. There is no glorification of the barbaric aspect of the violence; it is raw and hits the spectator in the gut. Macbeth is a bloody tyrant and there is nothing romantic or appealing about it. The brilliant general turned to mad ambition and crime from the prediction of three spirits/witches. In the time of Shakespeare they must have been the representation of the devil; a more contemporary interpretation would see them as the unconscious desires of a power-hungry man.

By his side is Lady Macbeth, an ambitious and ruthless woman who pushes her husband to perpetrate his first crime but who will end her own life, driven to madness by remorse. "Here's the smell of blood still. All perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand," she says. There is no peace possible for Macbeth and his wife; once the first blood has been drawn they are engulfed in a spiral of violence till they die.

Malana Maog and his team have constructed a set that uses large Plexiglas walls, between which the protagonists travel. The complete transparency adds to the feeling that the characters are lost in a maze of illusion, where sanity goes astray. It is also used to project blood when crimes are committed, creating a very powerful symbolic image of violence. Other scenes are not as symbolic and very young or sensitive souls could be hurt by the vividness of the depiction of assassination.

The actors chosen to interpret the Shakespearean characters are up to the challenge, with

impeccable elocution, and most of the time a subtle rendition of the emotions their characters are feeling. Rey Lucas as Macbeth is skilled at showing the nuances of a man that certainly has hubris, but is also weak to superstition, easily manipulated, a kind of vulnerable narcissist, who ends up being driven by his insecurities. Liz Sklar plays a Lady Macbeth that starts as a manipulative wife using her charm and her knowledge of her husband's weaknesses to serve her own ambition. Her despair by the end of the play is tangible and touching.

"Macbeth" will play at the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda until Oct. 13. The evening shows under the stars are gorgeous, but it is recommended to dress for the very cool nights. A picnic in the grove before the show has been a tradition for many locals; the space opens early to accommodate the dinners. More information and tickets can be found at calshakes.org

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