

Shakespeare with a twist

Radio Macbeth an accomplished, intriguing play

Bob Clark

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A popular Shakespearean tragedy that is seen in terms of the people performing it gets some pretty clever airplay in the new show presented by Theatre Junction.

Brilliantly conceived and fascinating to watch, Radio Macbeth is a recent creation of SITI Company, a New York ensemble-based company founded in 1992 by theatre guru Anne Bogart, who co-directs the production.

Closely adapted from Shakespeare's Macbeth, the 90-minute SITI version is an intriguing and very accomplished play-within-a-radio-play-within-a-play whose unfortunately brief Calgary engagement (ending today) marks the collaborative touring ensemble's Canadian debut.

The production takes its cue from seven radio actors who gather late one night (circa 1940) for a rehearsal of Macbeth in the gloomy, spare precincts of an abandoned theatre.

With the arriving actors comes some baggage left over from previous productions. Thus we have the mutual antagonism between Lady Macbeth (a stylishly haughty and imperious Ellen Lauren) and her wannabe Macbeth -- Will Bond, all sulkiness and breezy superiority in his early readings of Duncan and Macduff, but less so by the time he's the Murderer or the later Macduff. There are also the signs of dissatisfaction and pent-up obsessiveness on the part of Kelly Maurer who, although she may sink her teeth into the role of the Witches, positively chews up the mike as the Porter.

The other radio actors have their own residual idiosyncrasies too, ranging from eager-to-please tentativeness and impish humour, to practised coolness and over-zealousness in some of their lines, as they move in and out of the physical dimension of the mother play, caught up in little dramas and preoccupations of their own.

And where's Macbeth in all of this precise and carefully articulated emotional choreography that seems designed to shed a unique theatrical light on the common humanity, that links us all behind the lines (and voices) of a great Shakespearean invention?

Well, as played by Stephen Webber, our ambitious thane is a likable and uncertain presence, who, in the show's opening minutes, sits staring out at us, before turning and fleeing at the sound of his approaching fellow actors.

And that -- despite the show's sometimes wavering trajectory that leaves us pulled between our traditional understanding of Shakespeare's play and the new subtexts so deftly interwoven throughout the SITI version -- is where we see him again in the striking final minutes.

Only now he sits staring out at us in frozen shock (like a painting by Francis Bacon), while the last of the players make their exit.

This Macbeth is now utterly alone onstage -- as perhaps he really was all along.

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Review

Theatre Junction presents Radio Macbeth, created by New York's SITI Company, today

at 8 p.m., (matinee at 2 p.m.) at the Grand. Tickets:

Call 403-205-2922.

Rating 4 out of five

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