

Radio Macbeth (Theater review)

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(Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven. Conn.; 480 seats; \$35 top)

An Intl. Festival of Arts & Ideas presentation of a play in one act adapted and performed by the SITI Company from the play by William Shakespeare. Directed by Anne Bogart and Darron L. West. Sets and costumes, James Schuette; lighting, Brian H. Scott; sound, West; production stage manager, Elizabeth Moreau. Opened, reviewed June 20, 2007. Runs through June 23. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

With: Akiko Aizawa, Will Bond, Gabel Eiben, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, Stephen Webber.

A group of actors gather, ostensibly to rehearse a radio performance of "Macbeth" But there's more happening on an almost bare stage with Anne Bogart's SITI Company than meets the ear. Stripped of the traditional sets and staging--but not its theatricality--the experimental ensemble company's "Radio Macbeth" gives a swift and bracing take that connects to the spellbinding force of this "bullet of a play" even while the command of language from some of the performers is less than masterful.

This haunted and haunting production should find appreciative ands as it plays colleges and other venues that welcome non-conformist and expertly-rendered conceptions of familiar classics.

Bogart sets the scene for both play and players with an aural underscore of tense beauty by Darron L. West, who co-directed the show. Helming duo also experiments with other elements of sound: the use of radio microphones which the cast sometimes speak into, sometimes not; the selected moments when an unamplified voice is used; whispers, shouts and a first-class blood-curdling scream. They all contribute to the weird, limbo-like atmosphere that keeps the audience engaged, alert and tense--as if we were watching an exorcism.

In a way, that's exactly what it's like. What starts as a simple table reading by a theatrical company during the radio era assumes a life force of its own as the actors gradually take over the stage while the play takes over them.

Though the show uses only the words of the Bard, there's a whole other world going on that suggests a parallel universe--perhaps several: the world of the play, the interpersonal dramas of the actors, even the sensibilities of the audience and the times they are living in. After all, a story of amoral and ambitious politicians, propelled by powerful spiritual forces leading to disastrous results is something not unconnected to the present.

Actors do well exploring the sub-subtext as they command the stage in both the play proper and the backstage story of a theater company's personal dynamic--with romance, intrigue and shifting alliances of its own.

Ellen Lauren, dressed to kill in a stunning red outfit by James Schuette, makes a formidable and imperious leading actress in the troupe as well as Lady Macbeth. Will Bond gives a dark and brooding air to multiple roles including Duncan and Macduff, as well as his part in the backstage story. Kelly Maurer is impressive in a variety of roles, including the singular witch. While concept trumps text in his most significant moments, Stephen Webber is an engaging Macbeth.

But the concept is, after all, what gives the production its extra dimensions. Bogart, West and company deliver some terrific stage ideas and images. (A climactic sword fight done with slamming folding chairs is especially clever.)

Production values are solid and tour-friendly, though Brian Scott's lighting, while justifying its shadowy moments, is too often lacking in wattage, making the ambient effect more important than consistent eyestrain.