



War of the Worlds/Radio Macbeth, NY

image

Stephen Duff Webber and Ellen Lauren in "Radio Macbeth"

Photo by Michael Brosilow

War of the Worlds – The Radio Play

Written by Howard Koch, based on the novel by H. G. Wells

Radio Macbeth

Adapted from the play by William Shakespeare
Directed by Anne Bogart and Darron L West
Created and performed by SITI Company
Dance Theater Workshop, New York
Oct. 5-16, 2010

<http://www.dancetheaterworkshop.org/siti> (<http://www.dancetheaterworkshop.org/siti>)

Anne Bogart's SITI Company, co-founded with Tadashi Suzuki in 1992, is an experimental ensemble that applies Bogart's stylized principles of staging and collaborative creation to classic plays and collage-like "portraits" of famous artists. While developing a piece about Orson Welles several years ago, the company decided to re-stage the famous 1938 radio broadcast of H. G. Wells's "War of the Worlds," which inadvertently created mass hysteria among listeners who thought they were listening to news reports of an actual invasion from Mars. The piece was to some degree an examination of the power that mass media still has to whip up the populace with scary fictions. But aside from the sociopolitical commentary, the SITI company got intrigued with the concept of playing a troupe of actors creating theater primarily through sound, and they decided to tackle "Macbeth," creating a stage production of Shakespeare's bloody ghost story using the same basic design concept they used for "War of the Worlds" ("Mad Men"-ish business attire and rehearsal-room furniture). The two shows have never been performed together as a double-bill until the current brief run at Dance Theater Workshop in New York. Co-directed by Bogart and award-winning sound designer Darron L West, the shows' experiment with sound and imagination revolve around the essential question of much you can strip away and still create theater.

"War of the Worlds" is a multi-layered recreation. We are ostensibly watching seven actors playing actors in a sound studio performing a radio play – they're dressed in workaday clothes and speaking into microphones. But they're also performing a kind of theatrical ritual: they take their shoes off when they enter the space taped off on the black-box floor of Dance Theater Workshop. The actions they're performing refer to the daily activity of broadcast journalists, who manufacture media events that have an impact on the entire world. But a lot of the performance is simply choreography, a dance of sound cues, script pages falling to the floor, someone eating a mundane plate of spaghetti while details of a horrifying attack are narrated.

Focusing on a radio broadcast makes the experience quaintly distanced. Today it's electronic media that conducts these magical activities. Every day of the week in midtown Manhattan, a peculiar theater takes place – TV shows broadcast live in front of picture windows while passersby stand on the sidewalk gawking at them. And I found myself thinking about the movie "Wag the Dog," a very clever and dyspeptic treatise on the ways we depend for information on

highly manipulated forms of media. I kept waiting for something dramatic or surprising or revelatory to happen during “War of the Worlds.” Is it supposed to be anything more than an exercise in skillfully recreating physical motions? I don’t think I really got the piece until after it was over and stagehands came out to remove the furniture and pull up the white tape that had blocked off the playing space. Then I realized how much I’d been drawn into an imaginary reality: a simple but potent testament to the essence of theater.

“Radio Macbeth” operates on similarly simple principles, but it’s also slyly different. Individually and then in clumps of two or three, the same seven actors enter what is set up as a rehearsal room, stumbling around in the dark, setting out chairs and microphones. One woman sits at a desk and begins to read all the witches’ lines out of a script. Other actors begin to assume roles: the tall bald guy in the three-piece suit (Stephen Duff Webber) is clearly Macbeth, and the woman in the red dress, red hat, red high heels, and fur coat (Ellen Lauren) must be Lady Macbeth. At first there seem to be specific rules about how this adaptation of “Macbeth” is proceeding – asides and monologues are delivered into microphones, other dialogue is spoken unmediated. But then everybody starts speaking into mikes. Some stage directions are announced (“Act III, Scene 1”), others not. They’re doing “the Scottish play” but without period costumes and without blood. The banquet where Banquo’s ghost appears looks like a board meeting around a conference table. The battle of Birnam Wood is conducted with folding wooden chairs. Sometimes the action matches what the actors are saying, but sometimes it seems arbitrary or contradictory. The result is not exactly a radio play, definitely not a staged reading, but also not a fully staged enactment of the play – it falls somewhere in between the cracks.

Which could be a complaint, but finally is not. Who needs one more traditional production of “Macbeth”? Or who wants to see a version with a single conceptual idea that plays itself out tediously over the course of the evening? Whenever you think you know what Bogart and company are up to, they shift things slightly. The one constant is full attention to Shakespeare’s text, performed by highly skilled actors with excellent verbal and vocal skills. Without the traditional castle scenery and warrior jousting, I found myself hearing lines from the play that had never stood out before. Plotting the murder of Banquo, for instance, Webber plays the speech that begins “We have scorch’d the snake, not kill’d it” with an intense mixture of blood-thirst and soul-sickness. And Lauren as Lady M is riveting throughout. If ultimately the production remains a somewhat academic exercise, I wasn’t bored, and I’m glad I saw it.

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