

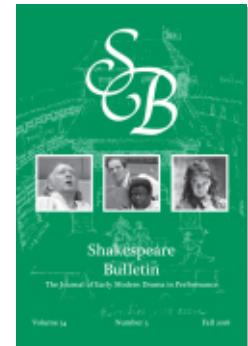


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Macbeth by Berkeley Repertory Theatre at the Roda Theatre (review)

Carla Della Gatta

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THEATRE REVIEWS

Macbeth

Presented by **Berkeley Repertory Theatre** at the **Roda Theatre**, Berkeley, California. February 19–April 10, 2016. Directed by Daniel Sullivan. Scenic design by Douglas W. Schmidt. Costume design by Meg Neville. Lighting design by Pat Collins. Sound design and original music composed by Dan Moses Schreier. Video design by Alexander V. Nichols. Fight direction by Dave Maier. Dramaturgy by Barry Kraft. Production stage managed by Michael Suenkel. With James Carpenter (Duncan/Porter/Doctor), Scott Coopwood (Lennox), Gene Gillette (Bleeding Captain/Seyton), Conleth Hill (Macbeth), Christopher Innvar (Banquo/Siward), Eddie Ray Jackson (Donalbain), Korey Jackson (Macduff), Billy Eugene Jones (Ross), Adam Magill (Malcolm), Rami Margin (Witch), Frances McDormand (Lady Macbeth/Witch), Nicholas Pelczar (Angus), Tyler Pierce (Fleance), and Mia Tagano (Lady Macduff/Witch).

CARLA DELLA GATTA, *University of Southern California*

When tickets for Berkeley Repertory's production of *Macbeth* went on sale, they sold out almost immediately. Though some of the excitement was perhaps due to the rarity of seeing a Shakespearean play on Berkeley Rep's stage, as this was only their sixth in the last thirty years, it primarily stemmed from the announcement that Frances McDormand and *Game of Thrones* star Conleth Hill were cast as the leads. With two highly lauded actors headlining the project, director Daniel Sullivan did not stage the play with an elaborate concept or make any significant changes to the text. A bare-bones *Macbeth*, with sparse sets and props, the production left the actors and the action to dominate the stage.

As spectators entered the theater, images of blue and black clouds projected on the scrim signaled nighttime. The audience quieted and a voice over the intercom warned of the use of strobe lights during the performance. A forest image materialized on the back scrim, and the lighting illuminated a textured bark design on the wings. The three weird sisters came onto the stage. Dressed in thick beige robes akin to those of destitute scavengers, they moved ably through the forest. The opening line, "When shall we three meet again?" (1.1.1), was spoken by the First Witch, who was nearly unrecognizable in the heavy costuming and

headpiece. But the sound of her voice quickly identified her as Frances McDormand.

The double casting of McDormand as the First Witch and Lady Macbeth placed her onstage for a greater number of interactions with Macbeth, and with the cast as a whole, than any actress usually has in this play. Her face and body were not always discernable, as the costuming of the weird sisters changed frequently, but her presence became a mainstay throughout the production. Although Macbeth speaks more than twice as many lines as Lady Macbeth and the First Witch combined, McDormand was made central to the action through her double role and through the staging. She was the first person onstage at the start of act one, she was onstage as the production ended, and she was the only person onstage as the curtain came down for the intermission. The performance's first half ended with Lady Macbeth seated alone at the banquet table facing the audience, wringing her hands with uncertainty. McDormand's silent curtain line functioned as an eerie precursor to the sleepwalking scene and emphasized her fate, rather than Macbeth's.

In addition to McDormand being double-cast, several other actors took on multiple roles. James Carpenter portrayed a sincere Duncan and a regretful Doctor, but it was his third role as the Porter that vivified the show. Employing a Scottish accent for this character, carrying a clang-ing set of keys, and moving with great physicality, he served as demonic comic relief amidst the brewing tragedy. His tall and lanky Porter, seem-ingly fearless, became frightened by the sounds of approaching birds and dropped his coveted keys. Although the red lighting produced a demonic effect, he exclaimed, "But this place is too cold for hell" (2.3.13–14) with fervor, causing the audience to laugh. When delivering Shakespeare's only knock-knock joke, Carpenter posed the question to the audience rather than answering it himself. The audience responded with "Who's there?" and roared with laughter. Barry Kraft's dramaturgy and Carpenter's ability to educe audience participation and high comedy in this scene proved an unforgettable counterpoint to the escalating devastation that dominated the rest of the production.

McDormand's Lady Macbeth was not commanding or angry, but thoughtful and witty in her protestations against her husband's inhibitions about committing regicide. Hill's Macbeth was a master orator whose physical presence connoted the lingering vestige of an able warrior. By contrast, Lady Macbeth's strength increased not with the dialogue, but with McDormand's pauses and subtle facial expressions. Her character evolved through silences, whereas Hill's Macbeth was defined by his



Fig. 1. Frances McDormand as Lady Macbeth and Conleth Hill as Macbeth in Berkeley Repertory Theatre's 2016 Production of *Macbeth*, directed by Daniel Sullivan. Photo courtesy of Kevin Berne.

skilled delivery of rhetoric. Each method proved fruitful individually, but the gap between their two acting styles remained despite attempts to stage moments of intimacy (Fig. 1). Macbeth gave his wife a handkerchief that she clutched to her breast when speaking of him; he later grasped it, overcome at the decline of her mental state. Each of them knelt to embrace the other, but when Macbeth did so, he shifted from cuddling her legs to rising quickly and with confidence, without much transition. The stark world of the production and Hill's awkward shifts between sonorous exposition and the intimacy of a partner-in-crime forged the only disjunction in the show.

Though some of the emotional transitions did not cohere, the scene transitions were flawless. Sullivan directed a fast-paced production, aided by scene changes achieved largely through projections on the scrim and wings. Video designer Alexander V. Nichols and scenic designer Douglas W. Schmidt integrated visual and aural elements not just within scenes, but between them as well. The transition from the forest where Macbeth and Banquo heard their fate to the setting at Duncan's court included infernal red lighting, fog that surfaced first on the scrim and then moved seamlessly onto the carpet onstage, and bagpipe music. Together these elements smoothed the shift between settings.

The heavy use of advanced technology created the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, the fantastical elements of the weird sisters, and the haunting of Macbeth. An oversized throne with a red moon above it appeared onstage for the cauldron scene. Macbeth strode in with confidence and sat himself upon the throne. As he drank from the cauldron, blood ran down his face and body, and video images warning him of his prophecy were projected above. With eerie music composed by Dan Moses Schreier, images of the characters and silhouettes with gold fiery crowns frightened Macbeth and the audience.

One of the hallmarks of *Macbeth* is the bloody violence it promises. Dave Maier's fight direction brought intense swordplay to the proscenium stage, with constant motion and the sound of metal swords clashing in the final battle scene. The action was fought in pairs of two and three, with the actors running on and offstage, intensifying the confusion. Although the fighting and imagery instilled fear, the visual of Macbeth's death occurred offstage. The production closed with the three sisters walking through the forest. Macduff entered with Macbeth's head in a sack; the sisters pointed to the head and placed a finger on their lips, suggesting Macbeth's eternal silence. His reign of terror had ended, and the lights faded as everyone cheered, "Malcolm."



American Moor

Presented by **Keith Hamilton Cobb** at the **Phoenix Theater**, New York. April 21–May 10, 2015. Directed by Paul Kwame Johnson. Set and lighting by Tsuba Kamei. Graphic design by Monty Stilson. With Josh Tyson (Michael Aaron Miller/Director).

KIM F. HALL, *Barnard College, Columbia University*

2015 was quite the year for "black" Shakespeare. Several performances (The Classical Theater of Harlem's *The Tempest*, produced as their annual "Uptown Shakespeare in the Park" at Marcus Garvey Park in New York City; Debra Ann Byrd and Dathan B. William's *The Sable Series: The History of Black Shakespearean Actors* at MIST in Harlem; and Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet* at Shakespeare & Co. in Lennox, MA) in different ways staged complicated, loving tributes to African American relationships with Shakespeare whilst salvos from the culture wars and debates over cross-racial casting blasted from both the US and the UK. Predictable outrage followed a June 2015 *Washington Post* blogpost featur-