

**THEATER REVIEW | 'MACBETH'**

# Something Wicked This Way Comes

**Macbeth** | NYT Critic's Pick | Off Broadway, Shakespeare | Closing Date: March 22, 2008

Brooklyn Academy of Music - Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton St. | 718-636-4100

**By Ben Brantley**

Feb. 15, 2008

His thoughts stalk him like snipers in the shadows, and when they attack, it's with a violence that leaves him shorn of defenses. Bloodthirsty enemies on the battlefield, double-dealing politicians of the court and would-be assassins at home: the Macbeth embodied with such fearsome insight and theatrical fire by Patrick Stewart has the wiles and the nerve to conquer such adversaries. What he doesn't stand a chance against is his own mercurial mind.

Rupert Goold's good and nasty interpretation of "Macbeth," now chilling the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music through March 22, has enough flash, blood and mutilated bodies to satisfy a Wes Craven fan. Set within a joyless, stark environment that resembles nothing so much as a morgue, this traveling production from the Chichester Festival Theater is also replete with eye-boggling technical effects that summon the Age of Stalin as imagined by George Orwell in "1984."

Still, all this sound and fury would signify, if not nothing, then not much more than yet another politically minded evening of Shakespeare in period drag were it not for the brilliant performance at its center. Mr. Goold, a fast-rising director in London, has clearly thought through his conceit of the play as a portrait of a totalitarian tyrant and the paranoid world he engenders.

But there have been many fascist-themed versions of “Macbeth” over the years. What makes this one a must-see is Mr. Stewart’s thrilling recognition that his character is as close kin to the fatally introspective Hamlet as he is to power-wielding men of ill will like Richard III. His performance is the first I have seen to realize completely what the scholar Harold Bloom means when he calls this play “a tragedy of the imagination.”

At first glance, this Macbeth does not look like a fellow given to self-reflection. On the battlefield he is every inch a soldier, with a ramrod posture and hard, appraising gaze that promise to keep wayward impulses in check.



The Macbeths, Brooklyn: Kate Fleetwood and Patrick Stewart.  
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

And yet you’re soon conscious of a raw susceptibility to errant thoughts more appropriate for a poet or a philosopher than for a military commander that sets him apart. Given prophecies of his rise to power (by those famous witches, here

portrayed as a trio of hollow-eyed hospital nurses), this Macbeth strikes contrasting poses to convey his sense that what they say “cannot be ill, cannot be good.”

One of these postures, hand to forehead and eyes squinted in pain, suggests a sensitive plant who has been vouchsafed a glimpse of hell; the other, upward-looking stance is that of a cocky pragmatist who has seen a palace on a mountain that is his for the asking. Small wonder that Lady Macbeth (Kate Fleetwood, excellent and original) willful, canny and hard-wired for success sees danger signs whenever her husband’s gaze goes hazy.

Mr. Stewart finds variegated degrees of shading between the two implicit extremes of that early scene. This Macbeth has been cursed by a depth of vision, an ability to conjure up the rippling consequences of every action he undertakes, that eventually leads him to the bleak plains of existential emptiness. Mr. Goad and Mr. Stewart make it clear that Macbeth is really killed not by Macduff (Michael Feast) but by his own willingness to be killed. It’s suicide by nihilism.

The stark and vicious world that surrounds this self-defeating brooder is less subtle and, for all its showy creepiness, less provocative than Mr. Stewart’s performance. But there’s no question that this Macbeth is a product of his particular time and place. Anthony Ward’s single set, lighted by Howard Harrison, has a grimy, institutional sterility. It is first presented to us as a last-hope hospital ward, where a bloodied young soldier hears his waning life measured out by medical monitors.

And though that same set which puts a heavy industrial elevator at the back of the stage to ominous use will variously serve as a battlefield, a dining hall, a kitchen and an interrogation room, it always feels like a charnel house. It is

fitting that the three witches (Sophie Hunter, Polly Frame, Niamh McGrady) are first seen as nurses speeding their patient to death.



Patrick Stewart and Kate Fleetwood  
in "Macbeth."

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Though their first apparition is a shiver-maker, I grew weary of these weird sisters, especially when they started prophesying in rap. Some of the Stalinist-purge imagery is brutally effective, like the public assassination of Banquo (Martin Turner). I didn't even mind the projected newsreel footage of epic parades and marches, which summon the heady breadth of the world Macbeth commands and why he gets drunk on its sheer vastness. (Lorna Heavey did the video and projection design.)

But the trippy sound and light shows can seem unnecessary and even obstructive. And certain devices like Banquo's discovering that the room where he's soliloquizing is bugged can feel gimmicky and forced.

But the fine cast which includes Christopher Patrick Nolan as a toxic porter who must surely be on loan from hell, and Tim Treloar as an apparatchik for all seasons affectingly summons the spirit of corrosive suspicion that pervades “Macbeth.”

Ms. Fleetwood’s vulpine Lady Macbeth has coarsened herself to be a player in this dangerous world. She would appear to be half her husband’s age, and she has the hard-boiled aspect not uncommon on Park Avenue these days of the trophy wife who has married up and is not about to relinquish her perch. (Dipping your hands in blood? It’s messy, but just part of the tiring yet rewarding job of being Mrs. Macbeth.)

Her scenes with Mr. Stewart, which chart the couple’s progress from irresistible mutual attraction to repulsion, are stunners, especially those set in their knife-filled kitchen, where like so many couples who entertain, the Macbeths nip off to share secrets and compare notes.

This is appropriate for a production that makes much of the motif of hunger. There’s an unforgettable scene in which Macbeth purposefully prepares a sandwich for himself while ordering the murder of his good friend Banquo. The quicksilver changes of mood that inflect Mr. Stewart’s delivery here suggest that even in full, cold-blooded command, there’s a voice rasping in Macbeth’s ear, feeding his unstoppable fears, including one that says the game may not be worth the prize.

In a brilliant coup de théâtre, Mr. Goold stages the Act III banquet scene, in which Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost, twice: once through his eyes and once through the eyes of his guests. As devilishly entertaining (and perfectly detailed) as this re-enactment is, it’s not strictly necessary.

Mr. Stewart makes it clear throughout that Macbeth is always seeing and

hearing what others do not. This is evident even in the way he pronounces certain words, as if they have suddenly come to autonomous, accusing life. Mr. Stewart who though best known as Captain Jean-Luc Picard of “Star Trek: The Next Generation” has had a classical career that has admirably covered many of the peaks of the Shakespearean canon has said he regrets that he is now too old to play Hamlet.

He has more than made up for that omission by giving us a Thane of Cawdor who has the intellectual richness and ambivalence of the Prince of Denmark. That gift may be Macbeth’s killing curse, but it’s a theatergoer’s blessing.

## **MACBETH**

By William Shakespeare; directed by Rupert Goold; design by Anthony Ward; lighting by Howard Harrison; music and sound by Adam Cork; video and projection design, Lorna Heavey; movement director, Georgina Lamb; fight director, Terry King; stage manager, Jane Pole. Presented by the Chichester Festival Theater, Duncan C. Weldon and Paul Elliott, producers, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Alan H. Fishman, chairman; Karen Brooks Hopkins, president; Joseph V. Melillo, executive producer. At the Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; (718) 636-4100. Through March 22. Running time: 2 hours 45 minutes.

**WITH:** Suzanne Burden (Lady Macduff), Michael Feast (Macduff), Kate Fleetwood (Lady Macbeth), Scott Handy (Malcolm), Bill Nash (Angus), Mark Rawlings (Lennox), Paul Shelley (Duncan/a Scottish Doctor), Patrick Stewart (Macbeth), Tim Treloar (Ross) and Martin Turner (Banquo).

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