



By **Shiroma Silva**

“Fair is foul and foul is fair: hover through the fog and filthy air” – ominous utterances usually spat out through the mouths of evil women instead emerge from the lips of babes. Because in Michael Boyd’s new production of the doomed play, the vile trio is not played by the conventional witches, but by angelic looking Victorian chimney sweep children who descend onto stage on harnesses to deliver their eerie message. It’s all part of Boyd’s brave staging in the first production on the RST’s newly transformed stage in Stratford, where an original use of set and 3 dimensional space breathes life into a well-worn play, adding an intrigue to this sombre affair that keeps the audience onside.

All the corners of the new RST’s thrust stage were thoroughly utilised to bring on the soldiers in the ensuing battles, giving a sense of the threats to the nation state that were to come and of a land about to be under siege. More symbolism follows upstage where a door leading to a chamber at the back of the arena effectively serves as a “death door”. It’s through this that King Duncan passed and slept his last night as the guest of Macbeth, before his bloody murder. It was also through this that Lady Macduff and children went in for safe refuge. When they

re-emerged through it the next day, they did so to face death at the hands of Macbeth's lynch mob. Three cellists sitting above the death doors played mournful, eerie music, almost serenading the unsuspecting victims through the gates of hell. The set was largely of derelict buildings, signalling the state of the nation over which Macbeth now ruled.

There is equally effective symbolism in the use of hoists; from which characters are lowered, sometimes right down onto the stage floor, at other times suspended in air to watch what's happening on the earth below. It's a powerful depiction of where they sit mentally, and almost religious in undertones. Ghosts of the murdered -of Macduff's wife and children, of Banquo and his son – revisit those left still trying to survive in a decaying place. Is this society similar to what we are experiencing in the world today, where those at the top have held onto power through corruption and wrongful deeds, resulting in civil war, chaos and anarchy – the downfall of Arab states, the possible end of the Euro, the terrible actions of ideological extremists in Scandinavia and looting in British cities by thugs and angry youth?

Being hoisted in the air equally symbolises the psychological state of Macbeth and his wife, where their (literally) suspended states, show their minds as being elsewhere. This is especially so in the banquet to celebrate Macbeth's newfound position. What should have been a celebration is clearly far from it, not least because of the paranoia that Macbeth and his wife inevitably feel. Suspecting what everyone else must be thinking, their thoughts rage in confusion. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth act out the guilty duo as they remain up in the air, mere spectators at their own party. They float ethereally above everyone else in the room, watching but not engaging with what's taking place below. They are isolated and disconnected from the whole process. The guests too are both literally and metaphorically on another plane and also act out a part that, simply going through the motions. The underlying implication is that everyone secretly knows (or at the very least suspects) what has really happened.

So in his direction, Michael Boyd almost conjures up a sympathy for the Macbeths, not just

because of how they suffer under the weight of their own neurosis, but also because of having sold their souls to achieve their ambitions, they are really not in control of themselves or enjoying the power they wanted so badly. Could this even map onto the situation akin to the last general election, where the Liberal Democrats were accused of selling out to gain a tiny slice of government? Similar to the Macbeths; a sense of loss pervaded, having betrayed themselves for what many on the outside felt to be a fleeting fling with power. Even straight after Duncan's murder, Ross and Macduff cast suspicious glances towards Macbeth but the audience is the only party enjoying the moment as the knowing outsider.

So Macbeth is driven to the brink of madness, and in this production, he and his wife they are depicted as ultimately very human - a couple that we put into their position by fate, who had an otherwise ordinary relationship but who saw the chance to become extraordinary. Having performed the terrible deed (and many subsequent ones to cover up the first) they are left immensely vulnerable. As Macbeth turns more and more mad, he grows increasingly fragile. Both he and his wife are now victims of their own ambitions, playing with their own destinies and attempting to deceive themselves in trying to live with what they have done. They cannot go back, but are forced to commit more evil to fulfil their destiny. So Macbeth is both a sympathetic and pathetic character. Jonathan Slinger pulls this side of Macbeth's character off very well. What is less convincing is that he is a brave soldier who has just won a great victory for his King because he's both psychologically and physically not substantial enough. The gallant warrior is much better depicted by the excellent performance of Steve Toussaint as Banquo, a strong, affirmative and likeable soldier who has the presence to wear the decorations he's won in battle with dignity. Whilst this is not in any way a light production (and in fact, the only lighter moments come from Seyton, played as an Irish drunk messing around with fireworks) the characterisation is not so much in-depth but broad and contextual. The sense in this production, even with the wicked murder of Duncan, is that Macbeth's early temptation and subsequent descent into hell is something we could all, in the right circumstances, be guilty of. So it's very much a progressive and relativistic view of wrong doing rather than a depiction of pure evil.

Lady Macbeth, played by Aislin McGuckin, is a beautiful woman clad in alluringly curvaceous Tudor costume, whose sexual chemistry with her husband is very real. Rather than portraying her as evil incarnate, Michael Boyd places her more as someone also swept along with the tide of fate. She and her husband are as guilty as each other from the start and the detached aspects of the staging conveys the idea that rather than being the instigators of wrong doing,

they were almost under a spell and victims of their own karma; two relatively everyday people for whom the die is already cast, now acting out what is put upon them in circumstances greater than themselves. It's altogether a very watchable production. Rather than being an in-depth soul searching interpretation with strong distinctions between right and wrong (as might have been more common with productions in the past) Boyd's take is much more modern and one where people and their actions are on a relative, sliding scale.

Macbeth continues to play at the RST until Oct 6th