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## Bway Critics Sharpen Their Knives on Hawke's Macbeth



Lincoln Center Theater's "Macbeth", staged by Jack O'Brien and starring Ethan Hawke, opened Thursday, Nov. 21 at LCT's Vivian Beaumont house. The production features a number of theater notables, including Anne-Marie Duff (Lady Macbeth), Brian d'Arcy James, "The Invention of Love" Tony-winner Richard Easton (as Duncan) and "Love! Valour! Compassion!" Tony-winner John Glover. Add to that "Caroline in the City" co-star Malcolm Gets, "Shrek" Drama Desk Award-winner Brian d'Arcy James (as Banquo), and "Take Me Out" Theater World Award winner Daniel Sunjata (as Macduff). ). Want further proof that this "Macbeth" has acting chops to spare? Glover, Gets and veteran actor Byron Jennings play the Three Witches.

It's been a Bard-heavy season on Broadway, what with a modernized "Romeo and Juliet" plus an old-school (and in-rep) "Twelfth Night" and "Richard III" all opening this fall. Reviewers were rough on "Romeo" but rhapsodized about the other two, so how will they treat the fourth entry in this autumn's Shakespearean onslaught?

Writing bemusedly for the Chicago Tribune, Chris Jones notes that Celtic intrigue is now in vogue, thanks to TV's "Game of Thrones". He appreciates Hawke's work in the soliloquies but feels that the actor's overall take on the lead character is far too passive: "His is a tragic hero without drive... a reactive, overly inactive Macbeth, looking to slide into a role that, for all the play's famous nihilism, still must be the one driving all the trouble on the heath." On the other hand, Jones says the production "is never for a moment dull" with an atmosphere both "populist and adventurous."

New York Times chief critic Ben Brantley disagrees, calling the show "dark and dismal" where "individual motivation doesn't count for much." In this style-over-substance staging, "the atmosphere...crosses the sensibilities of German Expressionism and the 'Hellraiser' horror movies." As such, Hawke's "mumblecore" Macbeth "is swallowed up by the prevailing shadows and spectacle" and "delivers Shakespeare's poetry like a moody, glue-sniffing teenager reciting Leonard Cohen lyrics to himself."

In his one-star review, Matt Windman, of AM New York, skewers the production with Lady Macbeth-like venom, calling it a "bloated, poorly acted and strangely conceived...mess." Windman complains that "the design scheme is all over the place" and echoes Brantley when he notes that Hawke mumbles his lines, "playing the role like a flamboyant prima donna who has taken too many mind-altering drugs."

In her \*\* critique, Elisabeth Vincentelli of the New York Post echoes the others' thoughts on Hawke, noting that his mumbling monotone stands in contrast to his over-the-top surroundings: "Add Japhy Weideman's fantastically stark lighting and Mark Bennett's bombastic, "Carmina Burana"-type music, and it's all so dramatic, you'd think you were at an Alexander McQueen runway show." It's not exactly high praise when Vincentelli adds, "A lot of this is entertaining in a 1980s, car-crash-horror kind of way... It's almost enough to make you believe that the Scottish play really is cursed."

By contract, the Associated Press' Jennifer Farrar praises Jack O'Brien's "elegantly noir production" and "inventive staging," and she lauds Anne-Marie Duff's "exquisite" Lady Macbeth. She also appreciates the work of such supporting players as Francesca Faridany (as Hecate) and Bianca Amato as Lady Macduff.

Newsday's Linda Winer is especially disappointed in Hawke's performance because he and director O'Brien had previously teamed memorably on "Henry IV" and "The Coast of Utopia". Here, however, Hawke is "oddly uncharismatic and too internalized" to be a gripping Macbeth. To Winer, "the stars of this 'Macbeth' are the supernatural creatures whose presence dominates – even overshadows – all the mortals." Though "some of this feels smart and fresh," other parts feel borderline campy. She does praise Richard Easton's Duncan as "a man we actually mourn when Macbeth assassinates him."

David Rooney, of The Hollywood Reporter, likes neither lead, saying that though Hawke and Duff have some physical chemistry, it doesn't translate to their "conspiratorial energy, inner torment or galvanizing evil, making them fatally dull company." The other performers are "hit and miss" and are inconsistent in delivering Shakespeare's dialogue. Rooney does note that the male witches are creepy, campy and playful with the language, though even they are "probably having a better time than anyone in the audience."

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