‘Macbeth’ gets an update

Before Showtime caused us to sympathize with Jeff Lindsay’s intriguingly psychotic serial killer Dexter, and before Fyodor Dostoyevsky helped us experience the mentally destructive anguish and moral dilemma of murderer Rodion Raskolnikov, William Shakespeare gave us Lord and Lady Macbeth. Originally based on three actual historical accounts found in “Holinshed’s Chronicles,” Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” shows little resemblance to the historical king. The real Macbeth ruled over a largely supportive Scottish people for 17 years. Shakespeare’s Macbeth is presented to us at the onset as a similarly likable man. His encounter with three weird sisters who seem to foretell the future, however, causes him and his loving wife to dream ambitiously of obtaining the throne. Eventually, these ambitious dreams become a destructive lust for power. Through Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare presents us a lens that allows us to study the degenerative effects of immoral and antisocial actions on individuals who were once both moral and successfully respected parts of the social fabric.

With the right direction and vision, modern directors can bring modern and significant relevance to these characters. Such is the belief of Paul Kassel, associate dean at the School of Fine and Performing Arts, and associate professor in the Department of Theatre Arts at the State University of York at New Paltz. Under the direction of Kassel, Mainstage Productions is presenting a progressive adaptation of “Macbeth.” According to Kassel, the political unrest and governmental usurpation taking place in the Arab world over the last several years offers a modern touchstone for the drama of “Macbeth.” “We are setting the play in contemporary times in an Eurasian country embroiled in civil war and foreign occupation,” he said in a statement. “In this world, there is evil that both influences and prompts acts of evil in others. In our world, however, these forces, these witches, are unseen. Evil can appear anywhere, anytime, and the vain, ambitious and the powerhungry are susceptible. ... We surround the audience with sights and sounds that evoke modern warfare, while honoring the text of Shakespeare with a talented cast of students.” As a tragedy, Macbeth remains at its heart the sad tale of a heroic individual who ultimately falls from grace through his own flaws. But coupled with Kassel’s modern setting, this production should prove uniquely accessible, enlightening and entertaining.

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Paul Boothroyd, left, in the role of Banquo, and Stefan Brundage as Macbeth star in Mainstage Productions’ “Macbeth” at SUNY New Paltz. JACK WADE/COURTESY PHOTO EDWARD MEISEL

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