PLAY REVIEW

‘Macbeth’ goes modern at SUNY New Paltz

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NEWPALTZ— “Macbeth does murder sleep”: Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” pictures a nightmare world of a man’s dream of becoming king of Scotland through murder and deceit. He kills Duncan asleep at night with his wife’s help and, later overcome by guilt, she sleepwalks and tries to wash her hands of blood. In the final battle Macbeth is killed and beheaded.

From medieval Scotland to a contemporary Eurasian country engulfed in civil war, the tragedy is given a new setting at the McKenna Theatre in an updated revival staged by the department of theatre arts at SUNY New Paltz. Directed by Paul Kassel, the student cast is made up of male and female soldiers in camouflage with rapid-fire rifles and men in business suits. In this wasteland no one rests in peace, least of all the dead. The witches have become the walking dead predicting upheavals and racing around in a cataclysmic future. The set design by Ken Goldstein is a desert ruin with broken columns, scaffolds and massive walls.

As Macbeth, Stefan Brundage is a man not driven by ambition but caught up in violence. He becomes a killing machine without humanity or depth. He rants and raves and never slows down until his final “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” speech, which is impressive. Robin Epes as Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, is calm, calculating and in control, a modern woman in black pants and silver gowns. Her high-style world comes crumbling down when she is reduced to madness and finally suicide. After the murder scene, their hands and clothes are covered in blood, which symbolically marks them with guilt. They are a well-matched couple in being mismatched from other humans.

As Banquo, Paul Boothroyd shows humanity in watching and waiting as the demon plot unfolds, but he is reduced in death to being a zombie who breaks up Macbeth’s royal banquet. Michael O’Connor as Macduff and Brendan Quinn as Malcolm have a long discussion in Act 4, Scene 3, about the future as Malcolm confesses that he will be a worse king than Macbeth. Their dialogue mirrors the present situation in Afghanistan where leaders on both sides may have lost moral direction and purpose. King Duncan is played by Evan Davis Russell as an affable but ineffective ruler who is powerless to change the mayhem that envelops his country.

The rest of the cast come and go as pawns in the fatal chess game. Lady Macduff (Jenna-Kate Karn) upbraids her absent husband for abandoning her before she is murdered; her son (Brielle Weiner) questions fatherhood and responsibility before he, too, is shot in cold blood; and two murderers (Shomari Pinnock and James Sorrow) go about their business with expressionless malice.

The Porter (Shaquana Bell) has a wonderful comic moment answering the door right after Duncan’s death. Her speech is a masterful summary of the prevarication and folly of a society that is already hell on earth. Among the other characters, Rosse (Ian Brodsky), Lenox (Genevieve Bozek), Angus (Kristin Battersby) and Donalbain (Maxwell Singer) make the right moves as sides change until the inevitable checkmate.

Costumes by Sarah Cubbage fashion the Eurasian characters in war and at court, regal and military, while Salvatore Nicosia’s lighting design captures the relentless sunlight, shafts of light, blood-reds and darkness that reflect this archetypal battleground.