Written by Jill Walsh
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Three Weird Sisters, sexy love scenes, sword fights, and murder. I tell you, life doesn't get much better than this. Well, at least for a certain theatre reviewer it doesn't. Not even the mosquitoes could keep me from enjoying Riverside Theatre's summer production of *Macbeth* at the company's Shakespeare Festival in Iowa City.

The tragedy of *Macbeth* is a story guided by elements of temptation, evil, and the supernatural, and how they influence human judgment. The soldier Macbeth is tempted by the foretelling made by three witches (appropriately called The Three Weird Sisters), and this drives him to murder Duncan, king of Scotland. The stealthy Lady Macbeth also lures her husband into committing the crime with her visions of their future wealth and royalty. As the horror story progresses, the tyrant Macbeth loses control of his power, his kingdom, and quite possibly his sanity. This is a tale of a human suffering and obsession, and how overstepping a boundary can cause total self-destruction.

As violent and bloody as this play is, the use of these tragic elements gives us an up-close-and-personal guide to just how startling it must have been to live in Scotland during the reign and murder of so many rulers over a short number of years. The on-stage violence – including sword-fighting, neck-breaking, and bloody knife wounds – adds a horrible reality to the past. It certainly brought much-needed cinematic depth to Shakespeare's sometimes-hard-to-follow script.

This production is also characterized by its humanity. Director Mark Hunter achieved a powerful relationship between characters and also gained audience response with the lustful interaction between Macbeth and his Lady. The very-physical seduction scene is like something straight out of the movies – *The English Patient* comes to mind – or any steamy romance novel (not that I've read any, of course). This lip-biting, French-kissing, wrestling couple gave us a nonverbal sense of Lady Macbeth's power over her husband – and also showed us an early tenderness before things fall apart. Though perhaps some viewers will think the scene goes a bit overboard (because you rarely see such physical passion on Quad Cities stages), we at least get the notion that the Macbeths are living, breathing people with emotions and desires – and not just characters ambling through their lines.

It takes a wide array of emotions to play Macbeth, and Nick Sandys' achieves a wonderful sense of control and range, especially during his monologues. He effectively guides us through his downfall – giving us a sampling of the lust, happiness, sorrow, and madness Macbeth is capable of. Instead of launching directly into the famous "Is this a dagger?" speech, Sandys pauses for about 30 seconds, perusing the faces in the audience and prompting us all to think, "Oh, now he's done it; he's forgotten his line." But no. He was cleverly drawing us in – making us (or at least me) believe there was indeed a floating weapon somewhere above the heads of patrons in the sixth row.

Equally charming is Wendi Weber as Lady Macbeth, gracefully shifting from loving wife to tyrannical queen. Her movements are precisely executed, but at the same time she has a delicate, introverted quality that makes her character appear innocent to the nobles she's about to murder. Weber's interactions with Sandys, especially during the murder scene and that of Banquo's ghostly return, have just the right edge of desperation.

The Three Weird Sisters seduce audiences with their limber physicality, eerie incantations, and willingness to commit fully to their roles, which seem to be nothing but lots of fun. Riverside has costumed the witches in velvety red dresses yet also chose to use the traditional makeup that makes the three look warty and old – an odd juxtaposition. And speaking of the witches and their knockout dresses, the conclusion really confused me. In the final scene, The Weird Sisters removed their makeup and strutted their stuff across stage. The audience graced the ladies with a few laughs, but the trick seemed added just to show the audience that these actresses were attractive in real life. This all seemed very out-of-place, especially considering that Macbeth's severed head had just been paraded across stage minutes before.

For more information about the Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival, visit (http://www.riversidetheatre.org). For tickets, call (319)338-7672. The festival runs through July 13 and also features A Midsummer Night's Dream *set in the 1950s.*