



25 May 2011 (Wed)

### Macbeth, National Taiwan University

Here is a second piece (after Zhongnan) to reference a precise time and place: contemporary Taiwanese politics. The great inventiveness of this piece works because it is keyed precisely to, and is disciplined by, this local context. Insights flow both ways: from play to context and back. A gong and snare drum are heard and a green banner is seen with the words “Yes! Macbeth”. The green is the colour of a Taiwanese political party. The three witches keep beautiful time to their dialogue on a kind of xylophone. They wear green waistcoats, picking up the green of the banner. Blocking is simple but effective, using vertical lines of movement. There is some wonderful part-singing. Basically the group takes on the greatest potential cliché in Shakespeare, and carries it off with great style and freshness. I notice in the script that the witches have become “enthusiasts”. The scene finishes with a snare drum roll.

Macbeth enters in black trousers and white shirt (with rolled sleeves) for his “two truths are told” soliloquy. Lady Macbeth enters from behind the banner, in a red jacket with singlet-top black slip. She takes some of Macbeth’s lines. It works. There is no incongruity. The dialogue of Lady Macbeth’s temptation of Macbeth is cut right down, but again with no sense of incongruity. “The serpent under it” is patently sexualized. She now puts a pistol in her husband’s hand which he points at his own head on “bloody instructions... plague the inventor”. At “screw your courage” the pistol is held by both, pointing to the audience.

The next sequence “O horror, O horror” (notionally at the discovery of Duncan’s body) is a rare dud note. The two white clad “lamerter” figures don’t resonate quite strongly enough with either the play or the context. The singing of the lines however does work. The piece takes some big risks: such as the clean shirt lowered from above to replace the bloody one that Macbeth discards. I like this. The fluttering dollar bills at “confusion now has made his masterpiece” strongly reintroduces the Taiwanese context.

Lady Macbeth’s delivery of the line “Nought’s had, all’s spent where our desire is got without content” is supposed to be “discontented” (according to the script and according to Shakespeare) but Lady Macbeth doesn’t look at all downcast. She is still in triumphalist mode. I like the “collaborator” figure who enters to comfort Lady Macbeth, but not the fact that the lines are taken from *Hamlet*. Lady Macbeth now morphs into a witch (a bit confusing for the audience who have no clue what is going on): “Be bloody, bold and resolute”. The “collaborator” persona works more successfully with the actor as a witch-figure, but it is difficult to see her as such when she continues to look like Lady Macbeth.

The “Shame Macbeth” banner is a return to the real strengths of this piece. The thematizing of the “resistance” scenes – in which characters alternately bewail Scotland’s fate and plot Macbeth’s overthrow – in terms of a thematic of “Discontent” is actually a brilliant stroke. Shakespeare’s characters are reduced to a “pessimist” figure and an “activist” figure (tidy and strong). The dialogue flow is somewhat chopped up; but it has conviction and is intelligently done.

The battle is briskly updated. Macbeth’s jailing as “one of our rarer monsters” is a nice touch. The ending duet between Macbeth and the “cops” who ritually repeat the witches’ opening refrain doesn’t work, at least to my mind. If you are going to resize Shakespeare, you need a very strong reason. On the whole however, this is a radical and intelligent piece of stage interpretation, of adaptation and of theatre.

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