

“Violent sorrow seems a modern ecstasy”

The Tragedy of Macbeth: The social order collapses into civil war

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William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606) is a haunting tragedy of ambition, conspiracy and bloody civil war. The version directed by veteran American filmmaker Joel Coen (of Coen brothers fame) as *The Tragedy of Macbeth* is an evocative production of one of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies, shot in black and white entirely on a sound stage.

Featuring Denzel Washington as Macbeth and Frances McDormand as Lady Macbeth, the new work by Coen (co-director of *Fargo*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Intolerable Cruelty*, *A Serious Man*) contains echoes of Orson Welles’ stark, low-budget 1948 version. While certain scenes are rearranged and some passages cut, Coen’s version remains true to the spirit of the play—with an urgency and seriousness for our time. It is difficult not to think of the fascist coup plot of January 6, 2021 and the general rise in authoritarianism around the world.

Coen’s *Macbeth* is atmospheric and troubling from the start. The film is carefully, elegantly shot, with hints of German Expressionism. Moreover, intended to be or not, the production is a sharp rebuke not only to the identity politics industry’s attack on Shakespeare, but, more generally, to all the reactionary nonsense about “cultural appropriation” and “staying in your own lane.” In the midst of the right-wing, anti-artistic campaign for “authenticity in casting” and in the wake, for example, of the foul claims by figures such as Sarah Silverman and Maureen Lipman “that Jewish parts should perhaps be played by Jewish actors,” the decision by Jewish American Coen to cast African American Washington in a play by an English dramatist set in 11th century Scotland comes as a much needed slap in the face. The film is further proof that important art transcends and also *discredits* the relentless obsession with race and identity.

Along these lines, in a discussion about this version of *Macbeth*, Denzel Washington commented that “in my humble opinion, we ought to be at a place where diversity shouldn’t even be mentioned, like it’s something special. These young kids—black, white, blue, green or whatever—are highly talented and qualified. So that’s why they’re there.”

For her part, McDormand told *Deadline* in an interview that

“we’re a very mixed company. Some of us are American English speakers, some of us are British English speakers, some of us are Irish English speakers, some of us are trained Shakespearean actors, others like Denzel and I have done some but not a lot. ... There was a lot of variation in our expertise, but when it came to our company, we created a style and a language for working together for almost a month of rehearsal together, so that time we had in a kind of classic rehearsal space really set the tone, I think.”

The director and the actors, whatever their ethnicity or gender, have taken Shakespeare’s material seriously, insisting on its relevance to a wide audience. “[Shakespeare] wasn’t an elite dramatist,” Coen said. “He was a dramatist who was writing for the masses and that was, in its day, popular entertainment. Even though it also happens to be great literature.”

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare explores with vast depth and artistry the havoc and barbarism generated by a Scottish general who seeks to murder his way to Scotland’s throne, setting off “dire combustion and confused events / New hatched to th’woeful time.” The language is beautiful and unsettling, and one finds new meanings with every encounter with the play.

“Fair is foul and foul is fair,” intone three witches (all enigmatically played as one by the astonishing Kathryn Hunter) at the very start. The boundaries between fair and foul, human and inhuman, light and dark, present and future, reason and unreason keep the play and Coen’s film in a state of mounting and ultimately frightening tension.

The witches encounter Macbeth and Banquo (Bertie Carvel) in the “filthy air” after a bloody battle. The warriors emerge from the field after leading the defeat of a rebel army, headed by the treacherous Thane of Cawdor in alliance with the king of Norway, aiming to overthrow the Scottish King Duncan (Brendan Gleeson). The witches claim that the childless Macbeth will become king, but Banquo will give rise to a new line of monarchs.

Macbeth’s victory is rewarded by Duncan, and he is anointed the Thane of Cawdor. But Macbeth has even greater ambitions. Under a night sky, he intones, “Stars, hide your fires: / Let not

light see my black and deep desires.”

Lady Macbeth, meanwhile, receives Macbeth’s thoughts in a letter. Childless but deeply connected to Macbeth, she hopes to spur her husband’s ambitions. She fears he’s “too full o’ the milk of human kindness” to murder Duncan, who visits their castle to celebrate the victory.

Her chilling soliloquy is powerfully presented by McDormand. Within the macabre castle walls, she appeals to the “spirits” to fill her “from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty.” Critic A.C. Bradley once argued that in the opening act at least, Lady Macbeth “is the most commanding and perhaps the most awe-inspiring figure that Shakespeare drew.” She is distinguished from her husband, Bradley wrote, “by an inflexibility of will, which appears to hold imagination, feeling, and conscience completely in check.”

When Macbeth later vacillates, fearing that he cannot go too far without losing his humanity (“I dare to all that may become a man: / Who dares do more is none”), his wife chastises him devastatingly as a coward.

The assassination is carried out, but its social and psychological consequences are far-reaching. Whereas Lady Macbeth first thought that a “little water clears us of this deed,” she ultimately realizes that “All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” Wracked by guilt, she meets a tragic end.

Macbeth’s emotional turmoil after he kills Duncan and becomes king in his stead is deeply disturbing. In the short term, Macbeth is able to either dispatch or force into exile as “traitors” his opponents, including Banquo, Duncan’s sons and the nobleman Macduff (Corey Hawkins). The murder of Macduff’s wife and children is one of the most frightful scenes in Shakespeare, and it is not evaded here. The sinister and omnipresent Ross (intriguingly performed by Alex Haswell) visits the family before they are slaughtered and tells them, “Cruel are the times when we are traitors ... [and] float upon a wild and violent sea.”

Ultimately, Washington-Macbeth delivers one of the bleakest speeches in Shakespeare, in which he asserts that life “is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” But these are the words of a tyrant, which demonstrate the rottenness of his own actions and conduct. *His* crime-ridden, psychologically tormenting life, like the existence of every despot, has proven to be empty, painful and worthless. Malcolm and Macduff offer a livelier, healthier alternative.

The film hurtles forward with devastating consequences. There are remarkable scenes throughout, and Shakespeare’s mesmerizing language is given its due.

The especially striking sequences include the encounter between the omnipresent and sinister Ross and a homeless old man, set in broken ruins in a bleak and dark landscape. Character actor Stephen Root does well as the drunken, bawdy Porter in the play’s single famed moment of dark comic relief. Coen organizes the actions, cinematography and set design

well, including during the scene of Banquo’s murder and the escape of his son Fleance (Lucas Barker). Washington and McDormand are effective throughout.

It is well documented that Shakespeare, to one extent or another, wrote *Macbeth*, set in Scotland, with King James I—from Scotland and obsessed with witchcraft—in mind. During James’s rule, political treachery and conspiracy were central issues. The Protestant James, ascending to the throne after the death of Elizabeth I in an epoch of the rise of the bourgeoisie, faced various counterrevolutionary plots seeking to turn England back toward the Catholic Church-dominated, feudal order. One such was the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, in which the conspirators hoped to blow up Parliament and the king and put in place a puppet monarch.

Ross tells Macduff of the horrific news of his family’s slaughter in a speech that deserves to be quoted in full and is strongly delivered in the film:

Alas, poor country!
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy.

Macbeth’s tragic rise and fall is in many ways a social tragedy. A social order in crisis, civil war, turbulence, regime change, tyranny and instability—these are elements that clearly resonate in our own day. Why someone like Coen, with a very mixed filmography, apparently out of the blue chooses to direct such a devastating classic no doubt has different sides to it, including accidental ones. But some pressing concerns, even if they are only vaguely perceived, born of the present crisis of American society, in particular, have valuably pushed their way into his body of work.

This latest film rendering of *Macbeth* is a production for tumultuous times that deserves a wide audience.



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