

# SOUL TALK

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

## Macbeth Here and Now

It's good to know that stage director Yukio Ninagawa has assumed the mission of directing all the plays of Shakespeare because, on the basis of his *Macbeth* recently produced at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, he is a consummate, possibly peerless, creator of Shakespearean images. In Ninagawa's conception, King Duncan and his elder son Malcolm arrive commandingly on horseback, heads above their noblemen; Banquo dies the death of a samurai, ferocious and full-tilt with the sword, engaging all three murderers at once; a huge chandelier of crystal and candles hangs over the banquet scene, and this same chandelier reappears to hover low over a bare stage from where Macbeth sets it swinging and swaying as he collapses belly-down beneath it, staring out at us or at nothing to declaim "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow . . ." from the floor; Birnam Wood not only appears through a scrim as an abundance of towering trees but really does move, advancing forward as the scrim rises on a battalion of soldiers, each bearing a tree, marching toward Macbeth; and since the whole of the upstage is encased in mirrors, the illusion of an army is effected by a handful of actors in military demeanor. With the legacies of Bushido and Kabuki supporting their labors, director Ninagawa and fight choreographer Masahiro Kunii have staged unbeatable battle scenes that conjure up what Stella Adler once intoned: "Don't just die, die like a Russian," which could now be reworded as, "Don't just die, die like Toshiaki Karasawa in the title role of Ninagawa's *Macbeth*." To the astonishing reverberation of a Bach Organ Work, with red streamers of varying lengths flying above them, Macbeth and Macduff meet to fight with swords; then to engage martial arts-like; and then to struggle hand-to-hand until Macbeth rebukes Macduff with the uselessness of his efforts:

I bear a charmed life, which must not yield  
To one of woman born.  
To which Macduff responds:

Despair thy charm,  
(since) . . . Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripped,  
causing the fight with all its sound and fury to cease. Macbeth turns in silence to look at us or beyond us into a place of no more tomorrows, which is funny and awful, and for the first time this un-kingly king becomes noble, again taking up the sword and crying, "Lay on

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Macduff," as they resume fighting with more and more magnificence to the finish of Macbeth when the tumultuous throb of helicopters merges with Bach.

Stella Adler used to muse that Shakespeare didn't trust the actor; that he put everything he wanted the actor to do in the lines, pointing out the disposition of the character's physical and psychological condition, as in Banquo's description of Macbeth following the pronouncements of the Witches:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear  
Things that do sound so fair?  
. . . he seems rapt withal.

All purely descriptive or narrative verse is absent from the Ninagawa production. The actors *do* what Shakespeare wrote (or Ninagawa's *mise-en-scene* creates what Shakespeare wrote) and they don't talk it. The somnambulant Lady Macbeth (played by the fierce and delicate Shinobu Otake) does not so much speak of the ramifications of the blood on her hands but feverishly, compulsively tries to rub the blood off her hands and wipe it from her arms. Reciting the poetry of Shakespeare is not what Ninagawa-san is about. Presumably his procedure was to begin with a translation of *Macbeth* into Japanese; trim the translation to its essence of dramatic action, distilling from the essence the text to be performed; and then have the performance text translated back into English to serve as super-titles for the audience. Even though *Macbeth* is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies and was made even shorter through cutting, the Ninagawa production spanned nearly three hours, indicating that while a lot of Shakespeare's words were unspoken his play was thoroughly enacted.

This summer in the Berkshires Tina Packer directed a production of *Macbeth* at Shakespeare & Company that altered little of the text but changed the play's time and place. The director's intention, "because of the events of the last year — not just the assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — but all the acts of violence going on in the world," was to highlight the fact that "the psyches and patterns of power have not changed much" over the course of history. Accordingly, King Duncan wore a handsome gray suit with white shirt and red tie while his embattled nobles were garbed in American Armed Forces combat gear. Once Macbeth had assumed the crown, he too dressed in a suit and appeared to be modeling an ignoble American executive, which could be considered appropriate to Macbeth's arriviste tendencies. To some degree actor Dan McCleary's deportment in the role was in keeping with

Mary McCarthy's intriguing notion of Macbeth (in a 1962 *Harper's* essay "General Macbeth") as "a commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways, (who) is the only Shakespeare hero who corresponds to a bourgeois type: a murderous Babbitt."

It is debatable whether the transposition of *Macbeth* from 11<sup>th</sup> century Scottish fiefdom to 21<sup>st</sup> century corporate/military America? by Ms. Packer & Company deepened our understanding of the play or elucidated violence. My preference is not to try to establish meaning by dropping a Shakespeare play into a specific time and place. Actually, in a Shakespeare production, time and place need not be absolute or logically consistent. The Ninagawa production was liberated in time and place, although the look of it was more medieval (or perhaps timeless) than modern and more Japanese than Scottish. The costumes were samurai-inspired with elements of today's couture. The battles felt intensely up to date, though they were fought with swords. The sets were atmospheric; giant flower-like waving stalks evoked a sense of soldiers in a field. The entire sound design was anachronistic. The Ninagawa production tried to be the play that Shakespeare wrote and it was, in spite of a sharp red pen having been liberally visited upon the text. Amalgamating helicopters with Bach did more to universalize the excruciating violence permeating *Macbeth* (bring it home to us) than I could ever have imagined. ♦ 2003

Written expressly for "The Soul of the American Actor."

Author's Query: For a book about audiences, I would appreciate any audience stories from the perspective of being an actor on stage or a person in an audience at the theatre. Please kindly send to: [joanna.rotte@villanova.edu](mailto:joanna.rotte@villanova.edu) or J. Rotté, Villanova University Theatre, Villanova, PA 19085.

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