

Dancing 'Macbeth'

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Shakespeare may grasp audiences first on an intellectual plane. But an upcoming production of "Macbeth" aims to meet crowds on emotional and visceral levels, as well.

Incorporating the language of dance into the long-revered poetry and prose, the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's sixth annual winter production is a feast for the senses -- and an opportunity to be moved by the tale of ambition in new ways.

"Any time an audience member can be awestruck or full of wonder about a moment, that's the best state to be in to experience Shakespeare," says Denice Hicks, the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's executive artistic director. "You're not worried about what you don't understand. You just see what you see and feel what you feel."

Directed by Matt Chiorini and featuring Eric D. Pasto-Crosby and Shannon Hoppe as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the piece incorporates dancers from Nashville Ballet as the story's three witches. Nashville Ballet's Christopher Stuart -- who will portray Macbeth himself in the company's own take on the classic later this year -- is choreographer.

The witches bring "earthy, grounded" movements, in addition to delivering a few lines. But Stuart also has been working with other members of the cast for a more vibrant, stylized feel overall.

A story misunderstood

Chiorini, a former staple on Nashville stages who now teaches theater at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y., says the Shakespearean tragedy is often misconstrued as "dark, gloomy, boring or sad."

It is a dark story, he admits, but not in the way of "people feeling sorry for themselves, lamenting missed opportunities about their lives." Rather, it's the tragic downfall of two people who do evil for what they consider to be good reasons. "And these villains are unique to Shakespeare in that they don't enjoy it at all," he says. "There's no smirk toward the audience... no twirling of the mustache."

Before moving to Syracuse, Chiorini was founding artistic director of Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre; he directed "Macbeth" there in 2009. But he also played the title role with the Nashville Shakespeare Festival in a touring production in 2006. The piece is a "crowd-pleaser," he says, and he was thrilled at the opportunity to take part once again.

"It has sword fights, magic, murder, madness and a little bit of danger," says Chiorini. "It has all of those elements that sell tickets and make for a satisfied audience. But there's also a compelling story at the heart of it."

A new dimension

In addition to evening performances and Sunday matinees, "Macbeth" will be seen by up to 3,600 schoolchildren in Nashville and surrounding counties during its run. Tickets and transportation are subsidized.

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival also provides continuing opportunities for those trained in its apprentice company; two from last summer's Shakespeare in the Park production of "Much Ado About Nothing" have returned. The cast rounds out with numerous Shakespeare alumni such as Brian Webb Russell, Evelyn O'Neal Brush, Jon Royal and Robert Marigza. But there are a few new faces, too, such as Aaron Munoz, who takes on the role of Macduff.

Munoz, who earned a Master of Fine Arts in conjunction with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, says "Macbeth" is easily a favorite among Shakespeare's works; the characters have clear motivations, the language is beautiful and the story is straightforward.

Adding the dimension of dance, however, makes it truly special. He is challenged, he says, to keep his character strong to play against the fluidity of the movement, a movement that informs the witches' power and gives otherworldly strength.

Choreographer Stuart, a fan of Shakespeare's works since high school, says he admires the playwright's storytelling abilities -- and he considers ballet a great art form for bringing those stories to life.

Chiorini agrees. With costumes by Billy Ditty, sets by Made First and light design by Anne Willingham, the result will be dynamic.

"We really want this to be visually satisfying, as well as emotionally and intellectually," Chiorini adds. "... A show like this one demands physicality and kinetic storytelling."

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ONLINE

To see a photo gallery from Nashville Shakespeare Festival's "Macbeth" rehearsals and a video about the production, go to Tennessean.com/entertainment. Subscribers, please go to Tennessean.com/activate to access additional digital content.

Scan this code to see a preview video of the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's upcoming "Macbeth."

If you go

What: Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents "Macbeth."

When: Thursday-Jan. 27. Public performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays; school matinees also take place Tuesday-Jan. 25.

Where: Troutt Theater, 2100 Belmont Blvd.

Tickets: \$24 in advance; \$21 ages 60 and older; \$12 students; group discounts available. Tickets purchased at the door are \$3 more, respectively. The piece is recommended for ages 10 and up.

Contact: www.nashvilleshakes.org, www.ticketstnashville.com or 615-852-6732

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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