

ASF's ambitious 'Macbeth' adds spice without sacrificing strengths

By Rick Harmon

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You can dress it in leather, chains and spiked hair, but "Macbeth" is still "Macbeth," and that's a good thing.

Instead of using a gimmick to sell one of Shakespeare's greatest plays to modern audiences, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival uses a post-apocalyptic setting as mere flavoring while drawing on superb performances, direction and stagecraft to win over the audience.

The curtain opens on an almost stark set that hints of the play's post-apocalyptic staging — a lone steel gear, a single steel pipe, a modern weapon that now is but a candle holder.

Merging a modern look of chrome and steel with an ancient look of stone, the platformed set is simple yet remarkably practical, adding interest while never getting in the way of the telling of this classic story of murder-ous ambition.

Peter Hick's intelligent set is representative of the production, which has plentiful trappings of the play's new setting but never loses track of the fact that the play (and the ability to brilliantly bring it to life) is the thing.

The acting is for the most part excellent. Ian Bedford gives a fine performance as Macbeth, the military leader driven by prophecy and the overly ambitious Lady Macbeth (Jennifer Barnhart) to a murderous, treacherous pursuit of power.

James Bowen (Duncan), Anthony Marble (Macduff), and Kurt Rhodes (the porter) are also excellent. As usual,

WANT TO GO?

What: "Macbeth"

When: First runs ends Saturday; performances will resume May 10

Where: The Alabama Shakespeare Festival, 1 Festival Drive, in Blount Cultural Park

Admission: Ticket prices start at \$30

Information: www.asf.net

what sets ASF apart from so many other professional theaters as far as acting is the depth of its talent, where longtime theater favorites such as Greta Lambert, Rodney Clark or Paul Hebron show up to add luster (and superb performances) to supporting roles between their starring performances.

A lone complaint is that upon occasion, actor movements didn't flow but came across as too premeditated, temporarily draining the reality from their actions. But these instances were rare, and the performance is at the beginning of its run.

As with all Shakespeare productions, the actors here are double-tasked, needing to perform their characters realistically, but also to use their talents to translate Shakespeare's lines for modern audiences so that not just their meaning, but also the passages' wit and power, are understood. It's not an easy task, as the latter often requires slow and perfect diction and as much body language as Shakespearean dialogue. But the ASF cast pulls it off marvelously.

ASF artistic director Geoffrey Sherman directs "Macbeth" deftly, demonstrating both a thorough knowledge of

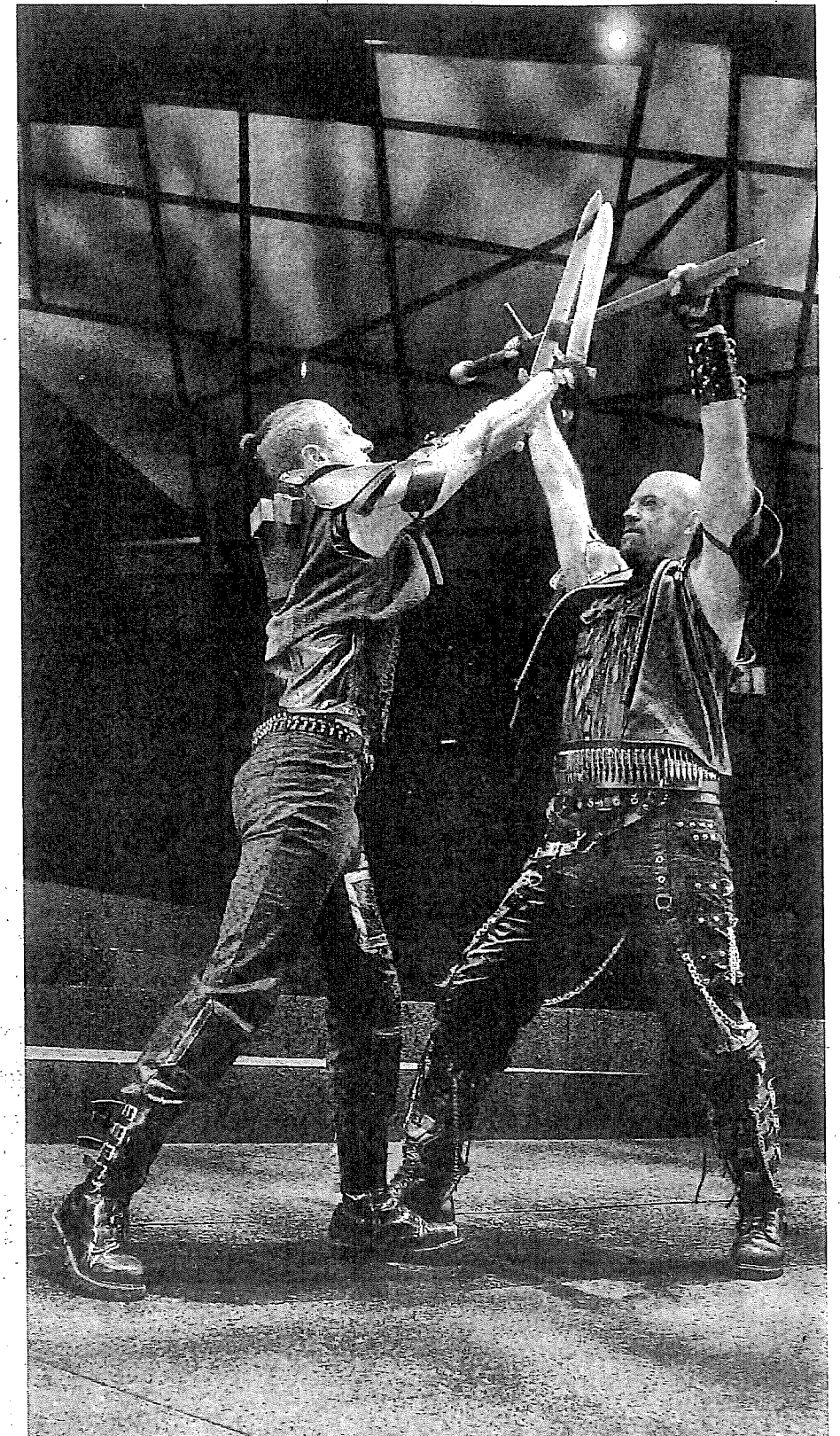
the play's strengths and a wonderful ability to realize when simplicity will have more effect than gadgetry. He knows when the play's supernatural scenes warrant the flash of the theater's stunning technical wizardry and when actors will be more effective without additional effects.

For instance, the scenes featuring the three witches (Lambert, Cheri Lynne Vandenhoevel and Jillian Walker) are wonderful. At times they use ghostly projections on a geometrical glass pane hung above the stage to great effect, but other scenes featuring these weird sisters are just as effective when they rely solely on the actors' physicality and strong performances. A scene in which Banquo's ghost haunts Macbeth at a dinner is all the more affecting for its lack of special effects.

Sherman also beautifully conducts the play's timing, compelling it to move swiftly without sacrificing the understanding or impact of the scenes.

There is much to praise in this production: Brenda Van Der Wiel's costumes, which mix fashion combinations of leather, plaid, chains, bustiers and spikes, are bizarre yet totally apropos; the fight scenes are beautifully choreographed; the special effects, the sets, the timing and most of all the acting — all are stellar.

Those expecting a "Road Warrior"-style romp may be disappointed. Those expecting a wonderful adaptation of one of Shakespeare's greatest plays will not be. This is a brilliant play presented brilliantly.



Anthony Marble as Macduff and Ian Bedford as Macbeth.