

The Scottish Play comes to downtown Manhattan in a free outdoor production

By Pete Hempstead • Off-Broadway • August 9, 2017



Clay Storseth (Banquo), Will Dixon (Macbeth) and M. Scott McLean (Macduff) in New York Classical's *Macbeth*, directed by Stephen Burdman.

There's something thrilling about watching a Shakespearean battle scene enacted in an open field. Audiences get to see one when New York Classical Theatre gets swords clanging in Battery Park, on the southern tip of Manhattan, with a free production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* performed by a talented troupe led by Will Dixon in the title role. The company has become a summertime staple over the years, and this new production is a terrific choice for those who want to take in some of the city's quality outdoor theater.

Director Stephen Burdman keeps the play to a manageable two hours while leaving the story largely intact. The famous soliloquies, such as Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech, are there along with the familiar tale of Macbeth's bloody ascent to the kingship of Scotland, spurred on by his viciously ambitious wife (a compellingly icy Jenny Strassburg).

Three witches (imaginative portrayals by Olivia Russell, Claire Fort, and Jamila Sabares-Klemm) deliver riddling prophecies that encourage Macbeth in his murderous quest for the throne while undermining him with promises to his friend Banquo (Clay Storseth in a fine performance). As Macbeth kills everyone who stands in his path, Macduff (a fiery M. Scott McLean) swears to avenge his wife and children's murders, leading Macbeth to the violent end foretold by the witches.

One of the fun things about New York Classical Theatre productions is that the audience moves around from scene to scene with the players. (Those who prefer to sit on the ground may want to bring a blanket.) This show begins at the large-bricked bastion of Castle Clinton and, guided by the three witches, moves to various locations in the park, including a field where the first battle scene takes place (Sean Michael Chin's exciting fight direction is a highlight). Despite having to compete now and then with the whir of a helicopter overhead, the performers project their lines strongly in the open air of the park without the aid of mics — another testament to the show's talented cast.

It's refreshing to see Shakespeare performed well without expensive bells and whistles. When the sun goes down, flashlights shine on the actors and create haunting images amid the shadows. Burdman has also chosen, wisely, to keep the setting of this *Macbeth* in old Scotland rather than updating the action to the present; Sarita Fellows's costumes of plaid kilts for the men help re-create the play's ancient time period.

At the performance I attended, a fair number of children around 8 years old and above appeared rapt for the entire play. Though *Macbeth* has some mature themes, it's a good introduction to the Bard for older kids and teens, and this production gives them that experience in a space less restrictive than an indoor theater. *Macbeth* will be performed in Brooklyn Bridge Park for the last week of the run.