

Production at Washington, DC's Shakespeare Theatre Company

Liesl Tommy's *Macbeth*: An "updated" version, with pluses and minuses, of Shakespeare's tragedy

By Nick Barrickman
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South African-born director-actress Liesl Tommy's *Macbeth* (starring Jesse J. Perez and Nikkole Salter as the famous couple) is an intense affair. The Shakespeare Theatre Company production at Harman Hall in Washington, D.C., which runs through May 28, places the tragedy about the 11th century Scottish noble whose lust for power eventually leads to his own downfall in the context of a modern-day Western intervention or "regime change" operation.

The audience is first introduced to *Macbeth* via the sound of rapid-fire automatic weapons. A montage of a civil war unfolds across the stage, as African soldiers with machine guns open fire on civilians fleeing from the carnage. One hears the dialogue of the "weird sisters" spoken over the chaos. In Tommy's version of the play, the three witches who first foretell Macbeth's fate are depicted as three "Westerners" dressed in business or military attire, or both, representing the pernicious presence of imperialism.

The title character (played by Shakespeare Theatre Company veteran Perez) is something of a military strongman. On receiving word of the witches' "prophecy," according to which the lowly Thane of Glamis shall eventually ascend to the throne of Scotland, events are set in motion that will only end in a final bloody denouement.

There is much that is truthful and chilling in Tommy's decision to remove the supernatural elements of the original plot and replace them with the all-too-real hand of "imperialist" meddling. The director's Tony-winning 2015 Broadway play *Eclipsed*, starring Lupita Nyong'o, treated the impact of the

Second Liberian Civil War (1999-2003) on several female victims of the conflict.

Nearly three decades of nonstop US military intervention in the so-called developing world has indeed left its mark on popular consciousness. "Who benefits from whispering into the ears of an ambitious general that their time has come, that they should murder for power?" says the director in a production note.

"In my world, growing up on the continent of Africa, that answer is obvious: Western interests intent on our resources always find a way to install a corrupt puppet and... enjoy untold profit from our water, oil, diamonds, coltan and so on." Tommy locates her drama within this context, declaring a central theme of her play was "the personal cost of political *chaos or instability*" (emphasis in original).

When Macbeth is instructed by the three witches to "be bloody, bold, and resolute," the scene has all the elements of a CIA intelligence briefing, in which the play's main figure is treated as a military-intelligence asset of an unnamed superpower.

Perez is effective as the lead character, although at times he appears somewhat overwhelmed and merely swept along by the welter of events. Macbeth's terrible anxiety and brooding over his murderous actions are heightened both by the performance and the precise use of lighting effects. Through this, the audience is given insight into the internal feelings and thoughts and external actions of the character. Salter is convincing as the intense, regal Lady Macbeth, driven mad by the knowledge of the crimes she has committed. In lesser

roles, actors McKinley Belcher III as Banquo and Marcus Naylor as Macduff, Macbeth's nemesis, both deliver powerful performances.

In general, the lighting, minimalist music and stage design are strengths of the play—each element heightening the tense moral and dramatic struggle enveloping and eventually annihilating the main characters.

Inevitably, contradictions emerge in a production in which the script of an early seventeenth-century tragedy is thrust into a present-day setting. At times, the lines from the original play seem imposed somewhat arbitrarily or artificially onto what we see on stage.

It would have benefited both the natural flow of the drama and the performers themselves if certain references, particularly those made by the witches/CIA officials, were slightly altered or removed altogether so that references to “Eye of newt, and toe of frog” would not appear so awkward in a scene depicting an intelligence briefing. In any event, it doesn't all work.

Far more worrisome is the director's effort at certain moments to promote the same US militarism that she criticizes elsewhere. Tommy's inclusion of a Vladimir Putin-type character, complete with Russian accent, to play Hecate, the leader of the witches, is a clear nod to the American establishment's effort to paint Russia's government as having “intervened”—without evidence to prove it—in the 2016 US elections on behalf of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump. Tommy's intentions are made clear in an interview in which she admits “the role of Hecate has been changed because of our current administration.”

This tasteless and absurd inclusion (appropriately enough, the character of Hecate is considered by many historians to have been added by a writer other than Shakespeare) diminishes the impact of the play's criticisms of Western intervention, while also highlighting the fairly superficial attitude of the play's producers toward militarism. Apparently *some* forms of US intervention are justifiable? Are the scenes of hijab-wearing civilian women fleeing government soldiers a criticism of the US's actions in the Middle East and Africa, or are they a plea for further intervention to stop “mad dictators” with shadowy Russian benefactors, such as Bashar al-Assad in Syria? The director is ambivalent on such issues.

These significant issues aside, Liesl Tommy's *Macbeth* is visually compelling and makes an attempt to place the Shakespeare classic within the context of modern political and social developments. Benefiting from many fine acting performances, the production is worth attending.

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