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Double Cast: The Audience Gets Pulled into Shakespeare Whether They Like it or Not with We Players' Macbeth

BY SF WEEKLY STAFF
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Macduff (Benjamin Stowe) and Macbeth (Mackenzie Drae) hack it out around innocent

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If the idea of audience participation in theater makes you want to find a movie to watch, I don't blame you. Too often the term signifies a gimmick tacked onto a show so a company can check off a box on a grant application; too often it comes from hubris, a belief that just because a

company offers audience members an opportunity, they must, they cannot but seize it.

The We Players, a 13-year-old company specializing in site-specific work in national parks, often offers exceptions to this trend. With its current revival of *Macbeth* at Fort Point (originally produced in 2008), the company makes one of its most compelling cases for performer-audience interaction, whether you're a spotlight-phobe or a compulsive stage-usurper.

The venue is at once disconcertingly realistic — with its fog, whipping winds, and mammoth cannon balls, Fort Point is probably the closest San Francisco could get to medieval Scotland — and conventionally theatrical, at least by this company's standards. In contrast to previous sets, such as the sprawling grounds of Alcatraz (2010's *Hamlet*) or the entire San Francisco Bay (2011 and 2012's productions of *The Odyssey*), the brick Civil War-era fortress is a contained space that offers a variety of discrete playing areas, from a large courtyard that accommodates sweepingly staged sword fights to more intimate chambers that enclose the hushed conspiring and hasty cover-up by the murderous Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Mackenzie Drae and Ava Roy).

Costumes by Julia Rose Meeks ably fuse the time of the play and the time of the fort. Some characters sport woolly shawls and burlap-like linens that wouldn't have been out of place a thousand years ago; others are in tailored military uniforms that could have been ripped from a photo of Stonewall Jackson's men. The fort's Escher-esque series of geometric archways, lining three floors of balconies, create the sense that there's nowhere to hide, but that someone else is always hiding, watching you — which suggests Macbeth's haunting by the three weird sisters (Julie Douglas, Maria Leigh, and Caroline Parsons), as well as the ghosts of his many victims.

Directors Roy and John Hadden make the audience a part of this scenery as well, ingeniously using the huge crowd as extras to create a society-wide sense of scope rarely seen on our stages. The show opens with a scene in Scotland's royal court in which subjects regale King Duncan (Steve Boss) with tales of general Macbeth's badassery in battle, which Boss absorbs with almost servile appreciation, cannily suggesting Duncan's vulnerability to coup. When a messenger enters from behind, he parts the crowd gathered around the king, instantly creating a formal aisle that makes the audience into courtiers and implicates them in all that follows. Later still, Roy and Hadden achieve a similar effect in the banquet scene, when Macbeth, celebrating his ill-gotten kingship, is tormented by the ghost of Banquo, Macbeth's compatriot and victim. Here, audiences are seated at a dizzyingly long banquet table, eating, drinking, and listening to live music (by Charlie Gurke); when Macbeth wrangles with a ghost no one else can see, it's the audience's party he's interrupting.

Wrangling with Shakespeare's language, however, Drae is less deft, natural only in Macbeth's few moments of unabashed bravura: when chasing booty or strutting away from battle. Roy makes a few more sophisticated choices — even at her most galvanizing, her Lady Macbeth seems encumbered by past slights and missed chances — that humanize a character who famously spurns “the milk of human kindness.” But Roy's interpretation is on the whole too restrained and weepy, slackening the story's mainsprings. Actors playing lesser roles, however, show more promise. Boss, who also plays the porter, makes sharp and fresh clowning choices, and James Udom is a magnetic Malcolm, never just embodying a vividly imagined character, but using that character to tell a vividly imagined story.

As Macbeth wades deeper and deeper into a pool of blood, Hadden and Roy move the show higher and higher in the fort. Each shift in location builds toward a climactic sword-fight, the details of which I won't spoil but whose perfect marriage of story, site, and stunt is the kind of scene that could make a lifelong theatergoer — and a lifelong national-park-goer — out of an audience member of any age.