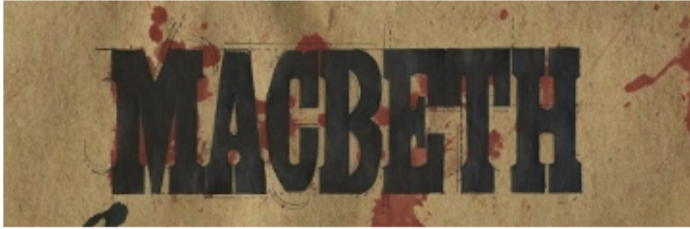


# San Francisco Theater Review: MACBETH (We Players)



by [Tony Frankel](#) on [September 7, 2013](#)

in [Theater-San Francisco / Bay Area](#)

## SOUND AND FURY INDEED

The idea of site-specific theater—theatre which is performed in unconventional spaces compatible to the script—is nothing new, but it seems to be gaining ground. From New York ([Then She Fell](#)) to Los Angeles ([The Manor](#)) to Chicago ([The Madness of Edgar Allan Poe](#)) to Oregon Shakespeare Festival ([Willful](#)), theater



practitioners are experimenting with the notion of one's relationship to his or her physical environment. Interestingly enough, there are usually one or two things missing: Either the play itself is unpersuasive and/or the acting is uneven. As such, these “events” are rarely thought-provoking and fail to move or touch us emotionally. However, as is the case with We Players' *Macbeth*, now being presented in conjunction with the National Park Service at Fort Point under the Golden Gate Bridge, the play may not be the thing, but the staging is an environmental tour-de-force.

Having witnessed site-specific theater nationwide in locations as disparate as a mansion, a bar and the inside of a car, never have I seen a space more exciting and thrilling than the coastal fortification completed in 1861 to protect the San Francisco harbor. Start with the weather. “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” are Macbeth's appropriate first words in the scene in which the Three Witches deliver their prophecies to him. The wind, barely a wisp outside the fort, becomes a



cold, torrential blast in the fort’s interior (take heed to dress in very warm layers). And while we had a beautiful, starry sky on opening night, prepare to “hover through the fog” as well.

The Witches (called Weyard Sisters in this production) prophesy to Macbeth that he will become King of Scotland; however, they also forewarn that future kings will descend from Banquo, a fellow army captain. Prodded by his determined wife, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth murders King Duncan, becomes king, and sends mercenaries to kill Banquo and his sons. His attempts to defy the prophesy make him strained and tyrannical; his Lady becomes unhinged; and a doomed outcome seems inevitable.

The experience in Fort Point is amazing, but as we dash about the fort from scene to scene, clarity of storytelling is sacrificed for the astoundingly imaginative proceedings. This is one occasion where I *highly* recommend you familiarize yourself with Shakespeare’s tragedy beforehand. Actors have to deal with not only the howling elements and the fort’s natural reverberations but the consistent, haunting whirr of cars driving overhead. Given the elements, it’s remarkable we can hear dialogue as well as we can. But because the incredibly hardworking thespians must shout, scream and over-enunciate, there is not much subtext in most performances. Plus, the casting can be dubious, especially Mackenzie Drae as Macbeth, who appears more as a collegiate football player than a tortured and



paranoid warrior hero and murderer who is at war with his own conscience. Indeed, when Macbeth returns from committing an act of regicide, Drae plays Macbeth as an exasperated guy who just had a really bad day at the office.

But I’m not convinced that storytelling was ever the primary motive behind Ava Roy and John Hadden’s direction. This production is all about staging and succeeds on that level beyond expectations. Before you go in, think of this as a company *presenting* Macbeth versus telling a tale, and you will be richly rewarded with a devilish good time. You will be assigned to one of two groups, briskly following either Sergeants Butler or Train as they pack you up and down spiral staircases, squash you around tiny alcoves and jog you through long, brick corridors (it isn’t necessary, but definitely grab one of the easy-to-carry folding stools for a more comfortable experience).

The opening is as exhilarating as theater can be: Outside the fort, a soldier sounds a call on a conch, the massive doors in the sally port open, and we are whisked into the parade ground where the Witches (Julie Douglas, Maria Leigh, Caroline Parsons) are preparing for Macbeth’s arrival. The iron-studded doors are locked, and the sense of anticipation is keen as

we realize that there is no escape (and no bathrooms) for over two and a half hours. Eerily blaring Charlie Gurke's original Kurt Weill-esque, jazzy compositions are strategically placed musicians (percussion,



trombone, trumpet, and woodwind). The wind begins its assault and we are in a delicious sensory overload that is a close encounter of the best kind.

Julia Rose Meeks' costumes are a gallimaufry of styles which bear an earmark of Civil War era militia and civilians—plus a little Game of Thrones tossed in. The fabrics—namely wool and muslin—are also informed by the time when the fort was built. While the fort is fairly well lit naturally (the show begins at 6:00), Joe D'Emilio and Joey Postil magically transform the setting as the sun sets, first with back-lighting and later with follow spots (try to espy the astounding view of the bay when you pass a rifle slit). The lighting for Benjamin Stowe's rousing fight choreography as Macbeth and MacDuff duel above our heads on the barbette tier is especially effective.

The blocking has got to be a logistical nightmare, and yet it works without a hitch: Nooks and crannies are transformed into bed chambers and balconies; officer's quarters become a refreshment area; and, most impressively, a hallway of



casements becomes the banquet room where Macbeth is haunted by the specter of Banquo while we munch on figs, dates and nuts.

Director Ava Roy has some powerful moments as Lady Macbeth and Lauren D. Chavez is a wholly sympathetic Lady MacDuff, but James Udom is the real standout as the king's son, Malcolm—while most actors are busy performing their duties and making their marks (even members of the audience are invited to play, becoming the forest of Birnam), Udom is the only actor to create a three-dimensional character. Confusing storytelling aside, We Players' *Macbeth* is one instance in which a lot of sound and fury signifies something.

photos courtesy of We Players

### *Macbeth*

We Players

Fort Point, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, 999 Marine Drive  
scheduled to end on October 6, 2013

RE-OPENS MAY 30, 2014, WITH AN UPDATED PRODUCTION

May 30 – June 1 (previews)

then plays June 5 – 29, 2014

Thursday – Sunday at 7:00 pm