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THEATER

There Will Be Lots and Lots of Blood

By TERRY TEACHOUT

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Red Bank, N.J.

Abraham Lincoln, who knew a thing or two about writing, esteemed "Macbeth" above all other plays. "I think nothing equals 'Macbeth,'" he said. "It is wonderful." It's also concise -- Shakespeare never penned a shorter tragedy -- and full of supernatural skullduggery and R-rated violence. The words "blood," "bloody" and "bloodier" are used 36 times in the text. It is, in short, the perfect Shakespeare play for those who've never seen one, and Two River Theater Company's new production might have been made for such folk. Jointly staged by Aaron Posner, the company's artistic director, and Teller, the magician with the single-barreled name who lets his partner, Penn Jillette, do the talking, Two River's "Macbeth" is a spook show that sheds almost as much blood as Tim Burton's "Sweeney Todd," and does so with equally thrilling results.



T. Charles Dickens

Cleo House, Eric Hissom and Dan Hodge as the Weird Sisters in 'Macbeth'

Yes, there's plenty of stage trickery in this "Macbeth," but that isn't the main reason to see it. Between them, Mr. Posner and Mr. Teller have given us a production whose flamboyant theatricality is matched by its colloquial directness. The pace is brisk -- several scenes are made to overlap with one another -- and the staging is sharply detailed without lapsing into fussiness. Atmospheric lighting, evocative music, believable swordplay: All are used not merely for their own sake but to give Shakespeare's poetry the explosive and overwhelming effect of a truck bomb.

Time and again individual lines and whole speeches are illuminated by action so appropriate that you'll sit up and catch your breath. "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hack'd," Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes) says, then flashes a sickly grin that gives away the fear he feels inside. A messenger tells Macduff (Cody Nickell) that his family has been murdered in cold blood, then puts his hand over his mouth in shock. "My wife kill'd too?" Macduff asks in reply, clasping his hands tightly behind his back as if to hold himself together. A little later another messenger informs Macbeth that his own wife (Kate Eastwood Norris) has committed suicide, and he grabs the man's bloody hand and smears her gore on his cheek.

Of course you'll want to know about the magic, but I don't want to give away too much, since its

effect depends in part on the power of surprise. Suffice it to say that actors vanish into thin air, daggers materialize from out of nowhere, and the three Weird Sisters (who look like year-old corpses) throw a bagful of obscene-looking objects into their bubbling cauldron with alarming results. As for the blood, there's lots of it, which is fine by me, though its most striking use is also strikingly minimal: When Macbeth emerges from the bedroom where he has just butchered Duncan, we see a single red handprint on his shirt, a touch that might have been lifted from a police report.

The text has been trimmed to a running time of two hours and 15 minutes by way of a series of nips and tucks whose purpose appears to be to make an already lean script terser and more immediately accessible. When Lady Macbeth says "Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'/Like the poor cat i' the adage," for instance, the second line is cut (an omission that all P.G. Wodehouse fans will spot at once -- it's Jeeves's favorite Shakespeare tag). Purists will bristle, but I had no particular problem with any of the omissions.

And the acting? Some of it is a bit spotty, but the major roles are brought off skillfully. Mr. Peakes gives us a plain, blunt Macbeth in a crewcut, a naïve middle manager who is lured into the deep waters of murder-for-profit by a sexy temptress, only to find himself over his head. Ms. Norris, a Washington-based regional-theater actress whose work I mean to follow from now on, plays Lady Macbeth not as a harpy à la Bette Davis but as a wholly believable woman lured astray by the siren song of ambition. Mr. Nickell's Macduff is taut with barely controlled rage, while Karen Peakes (who is married to Mr. Peakes in real life) is very good at conveying Lady Macduff's desperation. Certain smaller parts are inadequately cast, but everyone has such eye-catching things to do that you probably won't notice.

Daniel Conway's stark set, spectacularly lit by Thom Weaver, is dominated by a wrought-iron gate and two tall columns, each topped with a crown of thorns. The avant-garde drummer Kenny Wollesen has composed an all-percussion score (superbly played onstage by Richard Huntley) that works like a piece of film music, punctuating and underlining the dialogue and adding eerie resonance to such ordinary sounds as the shutting of a door. Dale Anthony Girard, the fight director, makes every clashing blade count.

This production, which closes on Feb. 17, will then move to the Elizabethan-style Folger Theatre in Washington, where it reopens on Feb. 28 and runs through the first week in April. And after that? I can think of any number of regional theaters onto whose stages it would fit nicely -- Chicago Shakespeare Theater and Connecticut's Hartford Stage come to mind -- but what I'm really hoping for is a New York run, either Off Broadway or in one of the smaller Broadway houses that let you get close enough to the actors to smell the blood. This horrific, riveting "Macbeth" ought to be seen by as many people as possible.

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Kate Eastwood Norris as
Lady Macbeth