

Curtain Call: Shakespearean Summer

by Alicia Grega | Arts



The 'Wood of Birnam' moves in through the audience to defeat Macbeth at Ghostlight Production's sixth annual Shakespeare in the Park production last weekend in Chinchilla.

Nothing Compares to Shakespeare on a Summer's Day

Tradition depicts magic sparking in the dark, glowing forth, almost as if this cloak is required for us to visualize its power. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* boasts numerous references to darkness and night. This is where the "weird sisters" practice their questionable art of divination which triggers the play's tragic action.

Shakespeare remains most produced playwright in the United States. It's a fact I sometimes grumble about as a writer and director who specializes in the development of new works. But there's a good reason The Bard continues to be staged and reinterpreted over and over again more than 400 years later and why thousands of people flocked to South Abington Park in Chinchilla to see Ghostlight Production's sixth annual Shakespeare in the Park production of *Macbeth* in broad daylight, or at very dimmest, sunset.

For all my grumbling, the truth is I adore Shakespeare. Ocean beaches and boardwalks are nice and all, but it's not really summer without a good dose of outdoor Shakespeare. Still, I didn't particularly jump for joy when I saw this year's Ghostlight selection. I'd seen several productions of *Macbeth* — one at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, now The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, when I was an undergraduate theater major at Drew University and another in Tuscon, Arizona, quite possibly at the University of Arizona. Neither one was particularly thrilling despite clannish kilts flapping in stage fights and dim lights combating thick stage fog.

It's not that I underestimated Ghostlight Productions, but I'm well aware they are largely an amateur company. Even while *Macbeth's* director Jonathan Strayer and his wife/partner Rachel Luann Strayer are as educated and qualified as any professionals out there as far as I'm concerned, their actors and staff are volunteers. I'm especially fond of the Strayers because, like me, they believe NEPA deserves the same quality of cultural experience as NYC and it's not above us to reach for that just because we live here rather than there.

Still, I didn't expect to be quite so impressed. Strayer used the real magic of theatrical craft, sparking audience imagination to do with *Macbeth* before sundown what better financed companies I've seen could not do with all the special effects and darkness at their disposal. Bloody hands reached the very furthest families from the "stage" in the form of hauntingly bright red gloves. An animalistic swarm of nine hissing "witches" replaced the three cackling stereotypes settled on by so many other companies. This ensemble beat on large barrel drums with long wooden staffs also used for fighting, providing tribal live percussion which we felt vibrate up the hill and through our camp chairs.

The only set pieces other than a few props, these barrels occasionally became furniture and anchored the play's action, necessarily staged in the round, kept in constant motion. Thanks to the excellent sound system, I heard lines in text I never noticed before or had at least forgotten. The themes of masculinity — in Lady Macbeth's first speech she asks for the balls to do what needs be done and young Malcolm may be hesitant to lead because he is still a virgin? Other jokes about virility and arousal helped renew my interest in a text that bored me long ago in the classroom.

Strayer's great strength as a director is getting this work across to huge spread out audience of various levels of theatrical experience and education. He held their attention to the very end.

It makes me angry that you can't see this production. Except thousands of people did. And the summer's not yet over.

Harrisburg's Gamut Theatre will bring their *Macbeth* to Tunkhannock in two weeks and The Scranton Shakespeare Festival returns to Nay Aug Park in July with *Twelfth Night*. I've seen that comedy twice as many times as *Macbeth*. So many times, in fact, that I almost auditioned so I didn't have to sit through it again. But after this past weekend's refreshing experience at *Macbeth*, my faith in unexpected theatrical magic has been restored. And thank the Bard for that, because I couldn't stay away if I tried.



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