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Macbeth

The Colorado Shakespeare Festival follows Lady Macbeth's lead.

By [Juliet Wittman](#)
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Macbeth is one of the most familiar of Shakespeare's plays, and with each new production, I look to see what the director has accomplished in the way of re-interpretation, depth of understanding or clarification. For this Colorado Shakespeare Festival production, Lynne Collins has added a number of interpretive touches. Early in the play, for example, the witches sigh out a series of key lines from scenes to come — "Macbeth shall sleep no more"; "What's done cannot be undone" — that seem to imply the mayhem that follows is pre-destined. And scholars continue to argue over the extent of Macbeth's culpability: Was he the helpless pawn of supernatural forces? Did the witches represent elements of his own crazed psyche, or could he have remained virtuous had their prophecies not galvanized a darkness already festering in his soul?



Spot removal: Philip Sneed and Karen Slack as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Details:
Presented by the Colorado Shakespeare Festival through August 16, Mary Rippon Theatre, University of Colorado at Boulder, 303-492-0554, www.coloradoshakes.org.

Subject(s):
[Macbeth, Colorado Shakespeare Festival](#)

But aside from such smaller touches, the CSF production is dominated by two over-arching directorial concepts. One is The Head. The set marks an ancient and indeterminate place, a construction of blue-gray-green stone that can serve as woodland, battlefield or castle — whatever location's required. There are bits of bodies represented in the stone, half-formed faces peering at you, washes of blood along walls, a large stone hand lying palm up, and, right in the center of the stage, a huge head. The head sometimes appears to be watching the action and sometimes seems

blind; its face is stained with ancient, rust-colored tears. In the program, Collins gives a hint of what she intends, quoting "Ozymandias," a poem by Shelley that describes the remnants of a huge statue of one of the pharaohs that bears

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a boastful inscription and stands in empty desert. The poem's message is that human achievement is futile and temporary, and all power eventually fades. So maybe Collins is saying that all the frantic bloodletting of the Macbeths — as well as the actions of their opponents — essentially changes nothing. But this head isn't Ozymandias, whose face Shelley describes as sneering. On the contrary, it seems gentle and sad — even, with its bloody tears, Christlike. Now and then, the witches' smoke rises from it; in death, Macbeth is pinned against its side. I'm not sure exactly what it adds, but it's interesting.

The other innovation concerns Lady Macbeth's motivation. Two scenes are interpolated at the beginning of the production: On the battlefield, Macbeth accidentally kills a young boy, then cradles the lifeless body and shrieks with grief; almost simultaneously, we hear a piercing scream, and Lady Macbeth flies down the castle steps carrying a swaddled dead baby, which she fondles dementedly, then leaves on a ledge. As the action progresses, we realize that it's her grief for the loss of this child that drives her lust for power.

Karen Slack, who plays Lady Macbeth, used the same interpretation in Listen Production's *Cowboy Macbeth*, but here she takes it several steps further. This Lady Macbeth is no cold-blooded viper, but a half-mad harridan who melts long before the famous sleepwalking scene. Her psychic disintegration begins right after her husband's first murder — that of King Duncan, which she herself has instigated — when she sees Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, and suddenly grasps the extent of their loss. After this, she becomes progressively more afraid and unhinged, while Macbeth grows more confident and more immersed in his own evildoing scene by scene. Slack's interpretation of Lady Macbeth strikes me as cleaner and richer this time. Perhaps it's that her energy and vivid passion are more suited to the outdoor Mary Rippon Theatre than the intimate space where *Listen* performed. But I also think she's gone more deeply into the character.

The image of the doomed child isn't confined to Lady Macbeth's fevered brain but becomes a trope that's used again and again, from the nameless child killed by Macbeth at the beginning to the vicious murder of Macduff's young son. Banquo's son, Fleance, is usually played by an adult actor, but here he, too, is a youngster, and at one point, we watch father and son playfully joust. This gives Banquo's death an added poignancy, and in the banquet scene where Banquo's ghost appears to his killer, we hear Fleance's disembodied voice cry out "Father" several times. (In the text, a never-identified third killer joins the two thugs who murder Banquo; in this production, the cloaked man is revealed to be a soldier, Ross, come to save young Fleance and, presumably, enlist him in the uprising against Macbeth). This insistent focus on children and the father-son bond strengthens the play's themes of succession, and underlines the Macbeths' barrenness and their drive to exterminate the future.

Philip Sneed, who took over as CSF's artistic director last year, plays Macbeth. He's a big enough actor for the role, with a clear, carrying voice. While his performance is a bit bombastic and actory at the beginning, the portrayal takes on contour and specificity as Macbeth gets bolder and nastier, and his rendition of "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" is powerful. There's also solid work from Geoffrey Kent (who directed the Listen Production version) as Macduff, and Steven Weitz is good as Banquo. Ted Barton plays both a regal Duncan and a hilarious drunken Porter; both portrayals represent high points. The fight scenes are well staged but sometimes, with the thunking of spears against wooden shields and the soldiers' loud

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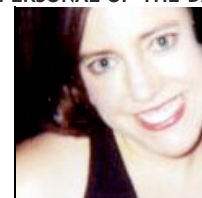
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and constant grunting, they become inadvertently funny. But the production is aided by Michael Rasbury's inventive and sophisticated sound design, which provides everything from bagpipe music to a metallic shriek that accompanies each stabbing.

This isn't a revelatory *Macbeth*. It won't stir your imagination or trouble your dreams. But it is clear, solid and often intelligent — and these are no mean achievements.

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