

NEW YORK POST

FAIR IS FOUL IN HARLEM

By DONALD LYONS

August 1, 2003 -- THE most provocative outdoor Shakespeare in town is not the gimmicky "Henry V" in Central Park but the chilling "Macbeth" in the Classical Theatre of Harlem courtyard.

Director Alfred Preisser has taken the leaf-walled courtyard and turned it into the dangerous domain of some 12 painted, leaping witches, plus one masked, black-clad spirit of death (who has plenty to do). It is their world, and the poor, plotting humans are but their toys.

But the humans have delusions of grandeur and power. At first there is King Duncan, seen atop a building making ready his entrance into Macbeth's castle (the kind and generous king is sensitively acted by Arthur French).

But Macbeth and his wife, baited by the witches, are preparing a bloody welcome. Macbeth is Ty Jones, who gives us a strong, ambitious but increasingly conscience-stricken man. It is a persuasive reading.

Lady Macbeth is the lovely and intelligent April Yvette Thompson, a creature at first inspired by the witches who surround her and tougher than her husband but then suddenly plunged into a crazy guilt.

Macbeth and his wife swoop on king and queen and make plans to assassinate Banquo and others they see as in their way.

Banquo enters as a ghost accusing Macbeth. The witches have a field day with the crown, even resting it on the heads of audience members. They have turned against Macbeth and toward the warrior Macduff (a fine Lawrence Winslow) and the politician Malcolm (Kenajuan Bentley). As the program warns us, "several severed heads" await us.

This compact play has been further cut to some 90 minutes — the dream procession of future monarchs is gone — but the vitals of the tale are here. By the end, the playful witches have switched sides: A new crop of fools has arisen.

It's a cynical reading, but an electrifying one.

MACBETH

At the Classical Theatre of Harlem, 645 St. Nicholas Ave. Through Sunday. (212) 868-4444.