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THEATER IN REVIEW; Toil and Trouble At Double Speed

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'MacBeth'

Classical Theater of Harlem

Witches own the Classical Theater of Harlem's "Macbeth." Shakespeare's three "weird sisters" are joined by a howling, dancing coven of 10 more, including a seductive skeleton called the Death Witch (out, damn'd pun!). Well, the witches must be dealt with; no witches, no play. Some way has to be found to make an emotional connection between an unbelieving audience and these creatures of the night. Here they seem to occupy the landscape of a music video, and that impression is a tipoff to the approach to the play taken by the director, Alfred Preisser.

He concentrates the story into an account of a violent tyrant eventually destroyed by his victims. The other personal tragedies are never allowed to become distractions; Lady Macbeth dying insane and Lady Macduff hacked down with her children are pathetic in different ways, but in the end they are road kill.

Nature provides a spectacular set, the outdoor interior court of the Harlem School of the Arts on St. Nicholas Avenue. The backdrop is a sheer ivy-draped wall of Manhattan schist rising 40 feet. On top of it, in the darkening twilight the backs of houses up on Hamilton Terrace suggest castle battlements, and the low, flat roofs of the school's wings abutting the wall are stages in air for armies and ghastly apparitions.

The play's relentless pace is pushed to rocket speed: the Macbeths murder Duncan, crown themselves and exile their foes in 30 minutes. We can then sit back for an hour's tingling free fall into gore, terror and revenge. The various grisly pursuits by assassins, and the play's battles, are inspired by video games. So are sound effects produced by four musicians. This is not overdone, but it is obvious, and the games' dark fairy-tale narrative method draws the audience into the play.

Several decapitations may be too many for some people. But in the final battle, while Macduff sharpened his great double axe on a stone (he struck sparks from it) sliced off Macbeth's head in one swing and handed it around to his companions, the audience erupted in a sustained hooting, stomping, gleeful roar. I have no recollection of such a response to any "Macbeth" I have seen through several decades. Mr. Preisser's borrowings from the entertainment media pay off; the characters and their world are medieval, but his idiom is insistently modern, and manifestly effective. D. J. R. BRUCKNER