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Macbeth delightfully devilish

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By staging *Macbeth*, the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival is taking several risks, shocking the audience by venturing into new territory.

For the first time since it began in 2003, the company is staging a full-blown tragedy with no comedic overtones. (The festival's funny version of the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* in 2007 was decidedly light fare compared with this *Macbeth*.)

And for the first time, the actors are overtly sensual in their performance, as *Macbeth* (Kris Joseph) lets his hands wander on *Lady Macbeth*'s (Kerry Ann Doherty's) body as they plot an evil plan together.

In various scenes that punctuate the play, the three weird sisters prance sensually with black sheers and fishnet accents. For anyone who has seen the performances in Prescott since 2003, it's a bit shocking.

But it all works.

On opening night Wednesday, 181 people enjoyed the dark tragedy, which is a stark contrast to the much lighter *Trouble on Dibble Street* that opened last Saturday.

Director and festival artistic director Ian Farthing intentionally chose the two plays to offset each other.

For *Macbeth*, Farthing uses every corner of the amphitheatre, creating a play that literally surrounds the audience, but is primarily performed on the professionally lit stage.

The costume design by Andrea Robertson takes the festival to a new level this year. The *Macbeth* costumes are dark, elegant and futuristic, with overtones of *The Matrix* and *Star Trek*. The vampy weird sisters give way to refined black and grey ensembles with a splash of red. Traditional Scottish tartans do not rule this *Macbeth*.

The black costumes stand out from the set, which has a colourful stained-glass motif also designed by Robertson.

The costumes of Kerry Ann Doherty as *Lady Macbeth* mark the pinnacle of Robertson's designs for this play, and Doherty's acting also makes the play especially memorable.

After a somewhat dull first appearance in which she reads a letter, Doherty's acting becomes riveting, drawing the audience into the murderous tale of fulfilling her husband's "dark and deep desires."

This is Doherty's first year with the festival, although local theatregoers may have seen her at the Thousand Islands Playhouse.

Kris Joseph delivers a solid performance as *Macbeth* and, like Doherty, is able to change the nuances of his acting to reflect his character's changing personality as he dissolves from ambition into pure evil.

As any high school student who has read the play knows, this is Shakespeare's darkest tragedy, a string of murders as *Macbeth*, spurred on by his wife, plots to take control of Scotland.

The entire ensemble delivers the story in an eloquent, professional manner, true to the Bard's intentions after 400 years of performances of the play. Over time, some of the renditions have been decidedly wacky, such as one set in a spaceship. Farthing opts for the traditional approach, allowing storytelling to carry the performance.

Even 11-year-old Jacob Isaac of Prescott delivers a convincing performance as *Young Macduff*, with regular festival star Alix Sideris as *Lady Macduff*, in one of the play's most dramatic scenes that left audience members

gasping in shock.

Mo Bock, known locally for his work for the Thousand Islands Playhouse, graces the stage as Duncan, King of Scotland, while Daniel Giverin strikes an imposing figure as Banquo, an army general who is Macbeth's friend.

Later, Giverin is spell-binding as a ghost in white shoes, staring blankly and eerily at the man who ordered his death.

Fight scenes represent a challenge to directors because they can easily descend into amateurism, but with choreography by Dorian Foley, the scenes played out well.

In one of the play's rare light moments, Brent Buchanan is entertaining as a porter who brings a few audience members to the stage. On opening night, attended by many local politicians, MPP Steve Clark was one of those who had a moment of fame on the stage.

One of the challenges of outdoor theatre is the other sounds and sights surrounding the audience.

On Wednesday, loud boat motors occasionally drowned out eloquent speeches, and costumed historical interpreters walking by for another event were an unfortunate distraction.

But it's testimony to the professionalism of the mature St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival that the actors still held the spectators' attention -and took them on a sensual journey of ambition, power and bloodshed that is one of Shakespeare's most powerful works.

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