

Macbeth: One Mad Power Grab, Many Dramatic Roles

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD April 21, 2013 [The New York Times](#)

The Scottish play, or “Macbeth” as it is known to laymen and superstition-free theater folk, sounds more Scottish than usual in the Broadway production that opened on Sunday night at the Barrymore Theater. The murderous general of the title is portrayed by the Scotland-born [Alan Cumming](#), whose rich, rolling accent brings a whiff of the green highlands with it. The real novelty of [this production](#) lies elsewhere: Mr. Cumming does not just play Macbeth but also all of the other significant roles in what is essentially a one-man, one-act hurtle through this Shakespearean tragedy of ambition, murder and soul-corroding guilt, here set in the chilly chamber of a mental institution.

The harsh lighting snaps on to reveal a man looking dazed and disoriented as two minders remove his disheveled clothing and help him into hospital garb. His clothes are sealed into brown paper bags with the ominous word “evidence” stamped upon them. His demeanor is meek and subservient, but bloody slash marks on his pale flesh suggest that this fellow has perpetrated (or been the victim of) some bloody deeds that have left his mind shattered and prey to tormenting fantasies. “When shall we three meet again?” he asks in a tone of frightened urgency as his stoic caretakers depart. This, the first line of the play’s text, spoken by one of the witches, unleashes the dark fury of [Shakespeare’s](#) tragedy, as one by one the characters take possession of this disturbed fellow, who flits manically around the green-tiled room as he snaps from one persona to the next, suggesting a swarm of bats let loose in a confined space.

Mr. Cumming, a Tony winner for [“Cabaret”](#) who currently appears as a canny political operative on the terrific television drama “The Good Wife,” is a versatile performer who here gets to indulge in the kind of high-hurdle challenge (or ego trip) that can prove irresistible to actors. He is also a born entertainer, who recently appeared with Liza Minnelli in a [concert engagement](#) at Town Hall. (Like many a celebrity in this era of all-platform saturation, Mr. Cumming also has his own line of fragrances.) Watching him perform this personalized rendition of “Macbeth,” I was at times more intrigued by the battle going on between the serious actor and the shameless entertainer than I was by the tense struggles taking place in the divided mind of Macbeth, a noble warrior who knows that killing his king is an evil act, or by the scenes of seething conflict between Macbeth and his more ruthless wife, given a voluptuous sexual manipulateness by Mr. Cumming.

Some choices made by Mr. Cumming and his directors, John Tiffany (“Black Watch,” “Once”) and Andrew Goldberg, tend to chase away the shadows in this corrosively dark drama. (However, the one passage of authentic comic relief, the sodden porter’s scene, is eliminated.) King Duncan is portrayed as a dizzy fop, speaking in fluty tones that make him seem like a featherweight leader whose dispatching might well be good for the country — an interpretation at odds with his depiction in the text as the generous, responsible antithesis of the ruler that Macbeth will become. Duncan’s son Malcolm, whose status as the king’s heir places him firmly in Macbeth’s cross hairs, is represented by an eerie-looking doll in a dingy dress, and Mr. Cumming uses a childish squeak to speak his few lines. With his innocent victims thus represented, Macbeth’s brutal acts are somewhat denuded of their malevolence. (The use of a child’s tiny sweater, symbolizing one of Macduff’s doomed sons, strikes a more haunting note.)

Macbeth himself evinces a mordant sense of humor now and then. After Macduff’s description of the disturbances in nature that took place during the night of Duncan’s murder — the “lamentings heard i’ the air” and “strange screams of death” — Mr. Cumming’s Macbeth says with a shrug, “ ’Twas a rough night,” eliciting peals of laughter from the audience. Hearing from one of the murderers he

has hired that Banquo lies dead in a ditch, with 20 gashes in his head, Mr. Cumming uses the same offhand tone to reply, “Thanks for that.” More laughter.

In others ways, however, the production, from the National Theater of Scotland, lays on the macabre trappings thickly. The cello-heavy music by Max Richter adds ominous underscoring. Three video monitors hanging above the stage flash black-and-white videos (drawn from security cameras swiveling about like snakes) to magnify Mr. Cumming’s face as his features transform themselves, signifying a transition between two characters. Banquo’s ghost causes a jolt of terror by stalking onstage wearing a full-face leather mask, his corporeality all the more striking since we seem to be in the realm of one man’s “horrible imaginings.”

And when an unsettled Macbeth seeks out the witches to query them at length about the future, he slowly pulls the entrails out of a dead crow — a long string of intestine grotesquely symbolizing Banquo’s line of descendants, for whom kingship has been prophesied.

But while the stylishly eerie trappings (the grungy sterility of the set, by Merle Hensel, is enough to give you the willies) and Mr. Cumming’s energetic flitting among characters keep us constantly entertained, the staging accrues little in the way of dramatic intensity or emotional power. Perhaps partly because he is playing all the roles (save for two small roles played by [Jenny Sterlin](#) and [Brendan Titley](#)), Mr. Cumming’s Macbeth never acquires the weighty, antiheroic stature that he should.

Mr. Cumming’s delivery of the major soliloquies is forthright and lucid but oddly weightless: the character’s descent into depravity has been sketched in brisk, light strokes that dissipate quickly, as if drawn in invisible ink. At times Macbeth — who speaks a full third of the lines in the original text — seems to be a supporting player in his own tragedy, and his death arrives with a bit of a whimper.

In terms of stamina and ingenuity, Mr. Cumming’s achievement is certainly remarkable. But I came away from my second viewing of this production — I first saw it when it was presented by the [Lincoln Center Festival](#) last summer — with the confirmed impression that while Mr. Cumming had persuasively differentiated all the key roles, he had not fully inhabited any one of them.