

MACBETH – AN INTRODUCTION FOR DIGITAL THEATRE +

Introduction

First performed in 1606, *Macbeth* is the shortest tragedy Shakespeare wrote. It traces the story of a Scottish general who receives a prophecy from witches that he will one day become king of Scotland. Spurred on by his own ambition and his wife's promptings, Macbeth murders the king after he finds out he will be over-looked in favour of the king's son. His ascent to the throne begins a relentless descent, as paranoia takes hold and he kills first his loyal friend (whose son the witches have prophesied will in turn become king) and then every threat to his rule – including the wife and child of a rival general. Eventually, the murdered king's son raises allies from England to bring to a bloody end the tyrannical rule of Macbeth.

Interpretation

I chose to produce *Macbeth* in part because, as a modern migrant to Britain, it seems to me the tragic (and its opposite, the comic) is the key expressive mode of the migrant condition. At its roots, this condition requires a physical, and at times brutal, uprooting of a person or group of people from one country and culture to another. A traumatic experience which is perhaps not unlike childbirth in its momentous consequences.

I was born in East Africa and grew up with an expatriate's sense of estrangement – both from the land of my grandparents (India) and the land in which I had my initial schooling (colonial Kenya). This dual estrangement shaped my approach to producing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which is as much a play about being estranged from humanity as it is about regicide. And regicide in Shakespeare, I have come to understand, has the same emotional heft as patricide: a forced inversion of the natural order carrying harrowing consequences for the perpetrators. *Hamlet*, in many respects a mirror of *Macbeth*, is similarly tortured by the death of a father.

My great-grandfather was brought over to East Africa in the late-19th century by the British to work as a "coolie" labourer building the East African Railway – creating a 600-mile rail corridor between the coast and Lake Victoria in the middle of Africa. The colonial conditions under which he laboured shaped his descendants, most of whom were born in East Africa. We were aware of being strangers, of being separated from India, living in a cocoon in Africa. Equally, we were not English, albeit brought up entirely in a British colony. When, at the age of 14, I migrated to Britain with my mother and siblings, leaving our father behind, I seemed to have become firmly lashed on the family's wheel of estrangement.

And so indeed it proved within the first few months of being in Britain. While I could speak several Indian languages fluently, I was literate only in English. Indian languages are structurally sufficed with a sense of social hierarchy, employing both honorifics and formal address. Growing up in Africa, it was inconceivable for me to address my father as my equal – either calling him by his name or addressing him as 'you'. In the Indian languages I spoke, the latter would take the form of "aap" – 'thou' being a very loose and archaic approximation in modern English. And so, two months into my life in Britain, when I sat down to write a letter to my father in Kenya

– having agonised for weeks about how best to address him – as soon as my pen formed the sentence ‘How are you?’, I felt my father die in my heart. A crack had appeared, which could not be filled, stunning me to silence.

Some such stunned silence I think overcomes Macbeth when the Witches first proclaim he “shalt be king hereafter” (*Macbeth*, 1.3.50, *Arden edition*). Fealty to a king is akin to loyalty and duty to father – a sense reinforced by the British colonial adage that the British Crown was our “ma-baap” (‘mother-father’). After the Witches proclaim Macbeth as king, I found it interesting he says nothing until they vanish, leaving it to Banquo to fill the silence. Not just a premonition but a clear declaration of the inversion of the natural order – for Macbeth to become king after becoming Thane of Cawdor, when both the Thane and the King yet lived! Silence is perhaps the only response to such sudden inversions of what we believe to be the natural order of things.

Such inversions take many forms. Growing up in colonial Kenya, it seemed natural that the occasional white men I would see were rulers. And so as a 10-year old when I saw the British Union Jack being lowered by a tall Englishman dressed entirely in white (the Duke of Edinburgh, as I later discovered) and the flag of the newly-independent Kenya being raised by the African man Jomo Kenyatta, I literally felt the ground shaking beneath my feet, as my tiny voice added to that of thousands of others shouting “Uhuru!” (‘Freedom’). Malcolm is clearly giving expression to a similar feeling when, on hearing news of the death of his father Duncan, he exclaims “There’s daggers in men’s smiles.” (*Macbeth* 2.3.136)

On first reading *Macbeth*, it had struck me powerfully that Shakespeare was overtly detailing the emotional consequences of subverting natural order. As when Macbeth, weighing up the consequences of killing Duncan, admits that the act “Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye” (*Macbeth* 1.7.24); or more acutely, after having done the deed, when he cries out, “Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep” (*Macbeth* 2.2.34).

The notion of the turban as representative of clan headship carries a powerful resonance in Indian society – as I discovered on my father’s death. Part of the funerary rituals involved tying a turban on my head, symbolising transference of familial authority from father to son. While the moment was profoundly sad, I cannot deny the flutter of pleasure that also coursed through my heart.

Did the obverse emotions run through Macbeth’s heart? Is this why he exclaims, when learning that the ‘turban’ may pass on to Malcolm, “Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires?” (*Macbeth* 1.3.50)

The turban also confers a legitimacy, suggesting that it exists beyond the vagaries of any individual. So, in my production, when Macbeth is crowned, Duncan’s portrait showing him wearing the turban is hung on the wall behind him... just as, at the end, Macbeth’s portrait is hung when the turban passes on to Malcolm. [*Picture 8: The Banquet Scene - photo credit Talulah Sheppard*]

Growing up an Indian in Africa, the notion of Fate – kismet – was ever-present: a word frequently used by parents and elders and a sentiment strongly featuring in the

ubiquitous Bollywood films I'd watch. Ultimately, it was the idea of Fate and how far humans can ignore it that attracted me to stage *Macbeth*: the Witches unfold a fate before Macbeth, but it requires his own conscious effort to achieve it – and then, of course, face the consequences. Macbeth is aware of this need for effort, despite his half-hearted aside after hearing the Witches' prophecy, "if chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, without my stir." (*Macbeth* 1.3.157). After assuming the crown, his thoughts quickly turn to the murder of Banquo, whose children the Witches prophesied will be king, marrying fate to his actions – "come, fate, into the list, And champion me to th'utterance!" (*Macbeth* 3.1.70-71).

The Witches' prophecies all come true but these prophecies are, at best, "honest trifles" - to use Banquo's words when he describes their actions to Macbeth (*Macbeth* 1.3.125) - designed to win "to our harm" those who would act on them. Which, tragically, Macbeth does.

And, it is this struggle between fate and human agency which led me to imagine the Witches as *hijras* – the ancient and liminal 'third sex' community of India. A community that I saw as offering a metaphor for my own non-binary identity in modern Britain – a coloured man from equatorial Africa, of Indian ancestry, with a British passport. [*Picture 2: Deven Modha Ralph Birtwell and John Afzal as the Witches with Rakesh Shah as Musician - photo credit Talulah Sheppard*]



This characterisation of the Witches as *hijras* also enabled me to make a break from the more usual presentation of them as old crones – a characterisation I'd always found uncomfortable, not least because it undervalued the dynamic agency of these characters – they are, after all, the propellants of the story.

While I have made much in this essay about kingship and fate, I am also conscious that one of the least used words in *Macbeth* is "throne". On the contrary, words for Time - day/night/today/tomorrow etc – dominate. Followed by words for body parts. This analysis of the vocabulary of the play suggested to me a tension between the visceral nature of the play and its philosophical musings.

Unlike Hamlet, Macbeth looks his actions directly in the eye, not excusing himself, almost seeing himself perform the actions and live through the consequences of them. At the end of the disastrous banquet, he reveals to his wife: "I am in blood/Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o'er." (*Macbeth* 3.4.135-7) Perhaps it is this ability to honestly know himself that elevates the murderous Macbeth to the level of a tragic hero: we cannot help but empathise with him.

Countering the philosophical reflection is the action of the play – a dynamic that seems to fairly hurtle the play towards its end. I think it is Shakespeare’s shortest play; it’s certainly his fastest. Having the text and action accompanied by a live musician helped me convey the play’s visceral quality, in part because I felt that only in this manner could we appreciate the sense of Time that dominates the playtext.

Time both in the sense of a clock ticking by and in the larger sense of the life-cycle, as Macbeth makes clear in his famous “Tomorrow” soliloquy in the final Act. All action leads eventually to death, life therefore being a “walking shadow”. This is perhaps the bleakest of all Shakespeare’s plays, where the main character forces us to look squarely into the abyss, like being forced to go through a black hole in space.

Roman Polanski’s film version I thought caught this sense of the wheel of time best. At the end, he had a wonderful long shot, in which we see one of Banquo’s sons riding towards Scone, where the victorious Malcolm has gone, and being accosted on the way by the Witches. A scene which almost exactly echoed Macbeth’s first encounter with the prophetic women.

For me, the *hijra* Witches personified this ambivalent sense of Time. Their non-binary gender, their distinctive costume, their antiquity, their emergence from the ancestral homeland all combined to make them appear out-of-Time. And, at the end, when Macbeth dies, their distinctive gestures I hope suggested the coming of the next king, much in the way Polanski’s last shot had.

I sought to further reinforce this notion of Time through dance: like music, dance I believe has the inherent quality of being out-of-Time – paradoxically perhaps because both art forms are so rigidly time bound. By choosing to depict the forest of Dunsinane getting ever-closer to Macbeth’s castle through regular dance-beats, I was aiming to convey a mass of forces bearing down on Macbeth and the sense of an inevitable fate. [Picture 4: Mitesh Soni Umar Pasha and John Afzal as the Dunsinane Chorus - photo credit Talulah Sheppard]



My Production

I produced the play in 2015, opening in a town called Hexham which in Roman times was one of the key out-stations along Hadrian’s Wall – the barrier between Scotland and England. The borderlands between Scotland and England seem to suggest an appropriate location for the play, which features much cross-border traffic and suspicion, as is the case most tellingly with Malcolm.

The location of the show's opening influenced Claudia Mayer's design decision to create the suggestion of a Scottish baronial castle, complete with portcullis. This 5-metre high wooden structure dominated the upstage area, the wall providing a lowering sense of doom, of a fate overhanging all the characters. [Picture 5: Robert Mountford as Macbeth - photo credit Talulah Sheppard]



This upstage wall was 'decorated' with a garlanded portrait of a turbaned forebearer. The play started with a portrait of Duncan's ancestor, suitably turbaned and adorned with a fresh garland. On Macbeth's crowning, this was replaced by Duncan's portrait, again, wearing a turban and garlanded. And this is replaced by Macbeth's on his death, when the real turban passes on to Malcolm's head. [Picture 1: Deven Modha as Malcolm Ralph Birtwell as Duncan Umar Pasha as the Sergeant with Rakesh Shah as Musician - photo credit Talulah Sheppard]



Claudia Mayer chose to dress the characters in modern clothes, each with shawls draped over shoulders – the shawls becoming these Asians' nods towards their current tartan home. The trappings of leadership of the clan, however, were kept to 'authentically' Indian – gorgeous Mughal-style long coats for the investiture of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, with a traditional Indian golden curved sword standing in for the sceptre of power. [Picture 6: Robert Mountford as Macbeth and Shaheen Khan as Lady Macbeth - photo credit Talulah Sheppard]



These set and costume design decisions also informed my own interpretation of the play as a dispute within an Asian clan; a clan that prided itself on ‘tradition’ and one which, certainly in its principal characters, was uniquely susceptible to ‘signs’ and ‘portents’, especially if they came from the ancestral homeland. A push away from and pull towards ancestral lands, it seems to me, that immigrants are particularly susceptible to. Hence Macbeth, a Scottish-Asian, is susceptible to the *hijras*. Coming from an ancient lineage in India, the *hijras* represent purity, authenticity. And, in Macbeth’s mind, sanctifying his murderous desires. It’s almost as if, seeing the *hijra* Witches, Macbeth feels entitled to wrest the throne from Duncan and cut out Malcolm from his inheritance. They certainly confirm for him that he is the ‘chosen one’.

To convey the sense of the play’s visceral quality, I chose to have a live musician accompanying the text and action; have the actors in bare feet; and employ hand-to-hand combat for the fights. The heart-beat provided by the musician was to me like the breath of life: once started, it could stop only when all the action had ceased. A truism perhaps, but I felt it very important for the audience as much as the actors to feel the pulse of the play physically. Bare-feet, similarly, offered an unmediated sense of flesh in contact with the elements – a sense enhanced by the sound of slaps, stamps, punches, when body parts were being struck, [Picture 9: Umar Pasha Ralph Birtwell and John Afzal as the Murderers with Rakesh Shah as Musician - photo credit Talulah Sheppard] or, as in the Dunsinane sequence, when the forest moved closer to Macbeth.



The Personal is the Political

I have woven biographical details into this essay as a way of both illuminating some of the choices made in my production of the play and of suggesting that for me – a coloured immigrant and ex-colonial – the personal has, often despite myself, become the public in the post-War production of theatre.

Post-War coloured migration has brought about perhaps the most significant change and challenge in British theatre – that of diversity. When I founded Tara Arts in 1977 with a group of friends, it was the first Asian theatre company in Britain. It emerged at a time when an Asian, Black or other coloured actors was most often seen in a subsidiary role – if seen at all. Certainly the idea of a Shakespeare production cast entirely with people of colour was inconceivable. Beyond the matter of opportunity, the unspoken assumption underlying this lack of diversity was that the Bard was not part of Asian culture and therefore irrelevant.

Where there were exceptions, such as Peter Coe’s all-Black *Macbeth* staged at the Round House Theatre in London in 1972, these were often characterised by condescension. As the reviewer for this production comments: “much of the verse, spoken by players with stresses and rhythms quite different from our own, is fractured. Not infrequently, it is difficult to follow at all what is being said....I wonder what it will sound like to those seeing it for the first time, though they will at least have a new “*Macbeth*” before them.” (*The Stage and Television Today*, 1972).

Over 20 years later, when I produced my first Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, I found myself at the receiving end of similar criticism. As the respected critic Irving Wardle put it “in the case of Jatinder Verma’s production of *Troilus and Cressida*, I feel an attack of blimpish nationalism coming on: damned outsider gate-crashing the club, doesn’t know the rules...Eventually, if not quite yet, the club will have to find room for it...” (*Independent on Sunday*, 1993).

The notion of a mythic ‘Club’ remains resilient in British public life. As an audience member of the National Theatre quizzed me after a panel discussion I attended with some of my white peer directors of Shakespeare in 2004, ‘what gives you the right to work on Shakespeare’?

One of the unfortunate effects both of post-War coloured migration and of the demands for greater diversity has been the erection of barriers across various cultural fields: who has the right to tell or portray which story. Culture has come to ‘belong’ to specific groups, to the exclusion of others. Ironically – an irony lost on most contemporary white British producers and funders – it was British colonial policy that inculcated a love of Shakespeare in the colonised. As Thomas Babington Macaulay opined in his famous Minute on Education in 1835, which argued for the introduction of English education in India, “we must do our best to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” (*Delhi: National Archives of India*, 1965, 107-117) One direct consequence of this policy is that, today, India has the largest number of Shakespeare students in the world.

In a very real sense, therefore, Tara Arts has been a project designed to reverse the estrangement caused by my own history. Casting an all-Asian *Macbeth* became an act not only of reclamation - reclaiming the play as a part of my non-binary identity – but also of making connections across the divides of history, race/colour and language. This impulse lay behind the Black Theatre Live initiative launched by Tara, while led to the all-Black *Hamlet* in 2016 (also available on Digital Theatre +). Incidentally, the director of this production, Jeffrey Kissoon, had played Malcolm in Peter Coe’s 1972 production of *Macbeth*!

While *Macbeth* concludes his ‘Tomorrow’ soliloquy with the bleak phrase “signifying nothing”, I hope this essay demonstrates the rich tapestry of the play’s concerns. And that it has gone some way towards conveying how the play allowed me to make connections with my own life – which, after all, is the purpose of telling stories. [Picture 7: Robert Mountford hearing news of Lady Macbeth's death - photo credit Talulah Sheppard]

Jatinder Verma
July 2021

