



SHAKESPEARE GONE MAD: Alan Cumming as a mental patient doing *Macbeth* in an insane asylum.
Photo: Jeremy Daniel



Theater Review

Alan Cumming's gimmicky, one-man twist on *Macbeth* does not quite cut the haggis

MACBETH

Written by William Shakespeare

Directed by John Tiffany and Andrew Goldberg

Ethel Barrymore Theatre

243 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.MacbethOnBroadway.com

By David NouNou

To perform Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a one-man show, playing all the characters, one has to be the greatest Shakespearean actor living today, insane, or into complete self-promotion. First let's rule out the obvious. This production is set in an insane asylum or hospital ward (it is never made clear), but insanity is *definitely* involved here. We also know that Alan Cumming has a penchant for flair and flamboyance, so there is a lot of hubris behind the scenes as well.

Brushing up on Shakespeare is a moot point since, no matter how well one knows *Macbeth* or doesn't, whether you read the Playbill synopsis or not, it makes no difference. The die is cast; your head will pop off in a dizzying manner. Yes, all the characters are here: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, King Duncan, Banquo, and Fleance; they are all ultimately murdered. The sole survivors, and this is not a spoiler alert, are the Three Witches; MacDuff; and Malcolm, who avenges his father Duncan's death.

Watching everything unfold here, with creepy music and the use of multimedia video screens, makes us feel like we're trapped in a 1980s heavy-metal music video, directed by a demented horror filmmaker. It is one thing to do Shakespeare with a twist, but to perform the Bard simply to be "twisted" (with two nurses in an industrial-looking asylum) is just hokey.

Alan Cumming is a multifaceted actor, as evidenced in his Tony-winning role of the Emcee in the 1998 re-envisioned revival of *Cabaret*; and his current role as Eli Gold on TV's "The Good Wife". However, he can be prone to excess. Setting a play in an insane asylum and having one person perform all the roles is not reimagining Shakespeare. Shakespeare is hard enough just being Shakespeare. Having one person recite all the roles (even in a truncated version) becomes maddening to follow. It doesn't become a bravura performance. It's self-indulgent showmanship, and at times it becomes excruciating.

This version of *Macbeth* originated at the National Theatre of Scotland. One can be as experimental as one wants there. However, to introduce a new audience to Shakespeare on Broadway, one needs a more traditional setting or ideas, without gimmicks. Now, here is a thought. How about having about six inmates doing *Macbeth* in an asylum to while away the time? Now that would be ambitious of them.

Edited by Scott Harrah

Published April 24, 2013

Reviewed at press performance on April 23, 2013

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