Play review: Macbettu

Pierre Kapitaniak, March 22, 2019

In darkness, a louder and louder metallic drumming sound is heard until it becomes overwhelming and almost unbearable, until finally some light is seen at centre stage where the first witch, played by a bearded man dressed like a typical old village woman in Sardinia, climbs down from what appears to be a grey steel wall. His antics and silly walks on a dusty stage, while the second and then the third witch climb down, meet laughter in the audience: those are witches that are not here to scare us. Their first words are to salute Macbeth (Leonardo Capuano) and Banquo (Giovanni Carroni), allowing the audience to understand that the play opens directly with the third scene.

It may come as a surprise that this 99-minute *Macbettu* raises no debate about the cuts in the text: what is left speaks for itself and manages to open new horizons to the understanding of the play. Indeed, one is under the impression that rather than editing out, Alessandro Serra subtly distils the quintessential plot of the tragedy, often transmuting text into visual metaphors. One example will suffice: Duncan's banquet is depicted as swine-feeding, elaborating on Lady Macbeth's evocation of the guards' 'swinish sleep'. And, instead of the Macbeths's tortured ramblings immediately before and after Duncan's murder, the latter is staged with Macbeth consistently cutting the king's throat as he would bleed a pig. Lady Macbeth instantly follows in his wake and picks up the knife he had dropped to replace it in the guard's hand.

Except there is no blood in the play. This radical choice makes other passages – like Lady Macbeth's obsession with washing hands – redundant. It is also coherent with a more general lack of colours: the costumes are black-and-white, and the dusty stage is virtually empty but for the four steel tables that alternately become a wall, a banquet table, the coronation room and even the world upside down to depict the witches' cave. This brilliant use of a minimalistic decor is further enhanced by an elaborate *chiaroscuro* bringing the actors to the fore and revealing Serra's commitment to lauded experimental director Jerzy Grotowski's ritualistic 'total act'.

Not only blood but also royalty is played down in this Mediterranean all-male production, both thematically and visually, as the throne – one of the very few props onstage – is reduced to a small wooden chair. From the onset, Macbeth and Banquo are portrayed like twin brothers, their heads shaven, wearing black trousers and white vests, and displaying the hyper-virile body language of Sardinian shepherds. The costumes are not only black-and-white; they are timeless traditional white shirts, black waistcoats and caps straight from the Barbagia rocky villages in Grazzia Deledda's novels. Far from the Scottish Highlands, *Macbettu* naturally blends into the Sardinian landscape and culture, as shown in the transformation of Birnam Wood into shepherds wearing the devilish wooden masks of *mamuthones* to the sound of sheep bells that are part of the costume of the Mamoiada carnival.

Yet the miniature throne may also be interpreted in the light of Macbeth's overplayed – and questionable – virility. The Lady of this tragedy is empowered if only by the fact that the part is played by the tallest man of the company (Fulvio Accogli), with dark long hair and a dark thick beard. Not only physically towering more than a head over Macbeth, she is also most definitely a dominating figure, leading Macbeth by the neck to the empty seat vacated by Banquo's ghost at the banquet table. And yet, later, as in Polanski's film, the sleepwalking Lady comes onstage naked – which in itself is a wager – and her ascension along one of the vertical steel tables is one beautiful and profoundly moving moment.

Speaking of beards, the most memorable element of *Macbettu* is certainly the treatment of the weird sisters. It has become customary for a Macbeth performance to offer original witches, whether old crones, sexy teenagers or pyjama-clad girls. What makes these witches incredibly fresh and outstanding is not so much that they are played by bearded actors (in fact only two of them have real-life beards) or that they have several additional witchcraft scenes (this actually seems to have become a twenty-first century general rule), but the fact that they serve as comic relief, providing counterpoint to the tragedy of the Macbeths throughout the play. Their antics are a mix of Alinea, Tex Avery and the Monty Python's Flying Circus, and Serra even manages to nod to *The Matrix* when one of the witches comes with an incredibly long broom that she swings at one of the sisters who avoids it by leaning back in slow motion. Moreover, the three sisters literally lend a helping hand to the Porter (Maurizio Giordo), when they surreptitiously come to clear the stones that were left on the stage from the previous scene. Such a choice affects the play structurally, as it expands the comic elements beyond the Porter's scene, introducing a new balance not unlike *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. Even the cauldron (actually cauldron-less) scene is treated in this way: one of the tables from the banquet is left for the witches to sit upside down (i.e. they lean downwards resting their legs on the top of the table, like bats in a cave). Beyond the visual fun of the tableau, it offers a very relevant reading of witchcraft as total inversion of existing order. And at the end of the scene, Macbeth plays at 'Statues' to hear each prophecy.

Macbettu, which has already won the Ubu award for the 2017 best theatre show in Italy, is an incessant cauldronful of fiendishly inventive ideas that capture the audience in a buoyant whirlwind meticulously orchestrated by Serra like an irresistible dance macabre.