

The price of power: Santa Cruz Shakespeare delivers a spellbinding ‘Macbeth’



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Quick Take

Paul Mullins masterfully directs Shakespeare's timeless tragedy, pairing exceptional performances with vivid stagecraft and making Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "Macbeth" a must-see centerpiece of the summer season.

Power has always fascinated us – and so have the people willing to sacrifice everything to obtain it. Four hundred years after Shakespeare wrote “Macbeth,” his tale of unchecked ambition, political power and moral collapse refuses to stay locked in the past. Every generation finds itself somewhere within its story. Santa Cruz Shakespeare’s spellbinding new production, directed by Paul Mullins, reminds us exactly why.

Rather than transplanting the play to another era or burdening it with a modern concept, Mullins embraces the medieval world Shakespeare imagined. It is a refreshingly traditional interpretation, one that trusts the language, the actors and the story itself. The result is an emotionally gripping production that feels remarkably immediate.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz Shakespeare

What: Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”

When: Through Aug. 30

Where: The Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park, 501 Upper Park Rd., Santa Cruz

Tickets: [Click here](#) or 831-460-6399

For those unfamiliar with Shakespeare’s shortest tragedy, “Macbeth” follows a celebrated Scottish general whose fate changes after three mysterious witches prophesy that he will become king. Spurred on by his fiercely ambitious wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and seizes the throne. But power won through bloodshed can never be held in peace. As guilt gives way to paranoia, and paranoia to tyranny, Macbeth’s desperate attempts to protect his crown leave a trail of death that ultimately destroys both his kingdom and his soul.

The production begins with an arresting battle fought in slow motion, like a living painting, before suddenly bursting into real time. The transition is exhilarating, immediately plunging the audience into war-ravaged Scotland while establishing the relentless momentum that carries through the evening.

Mullins repeatedly tells the story through images as eloquently as words. Again and again, Mullins creates stage pictures that linger in the imagination. Whether the witches close ranks around Macbeth as they silently offer him the dagger of destiny, or the ensemble gathers in sculptural formations with crowns held aloft, each composition feels meticulously crafted. These wordless moments become visual metaphors for temptation, ambition and destiny.

Those visual moments provide the framework for a cast that meets Mullins’ vision at every turn, beginning with Dan Donohue’s riveting performance as Macbeth.



“Macbeth” at Santa Cruz Shakespeare featuring Dan Donohue as Macbeth. Credit: Kevin Lohman

Instead of approaching Shakespeare’s language with grand theatrical flourish, Donohue makes every line feel like a spontaneous thought. His delivery is conversational, allowing the verse to breathe naturally while revealing the humanity beneath the legendary figure. Donohue possesses an extraordinary command of silence, using carefully measured pauses to reveal fear, uncertainty, and mounting desperation.

Donohue never plays Macbeth as a larger-than-life tyrant. He is a respected soldier who slowly allows ambition to outrun conscience until the man disappears beneath the crown. That humanity makes his downfall all the more devastating. Donohue makes every step of that descent believable, creating a Macbeth who is both frightening and profoundly tragic.

Several of Macbeth’s great soliloquies unfolded before an audience so quiet you could hear the leaves rustling through the grove. It was the kind of attentive silence every actor hopes to earn.

Equally compelling is Paige Lindsey White’s Lady Macbeth. White gives Lady Macbeth a steely conviction that is every bit as dangerous as cruelty. She believes greatness demands sacrifice, and her certainty is as captivating as it is terrifying.



Paige Lindsey White as Lady Macbeth in “Macbeth” at Santa Cruz Shakespeare. Credit: Kevin Lohman

It is especially satisfying to see White inhabiting one of Shakespeare’s great female roles after playing several male characters in recent productions. She begins with unwavering determination, manipulating her husband with subtle precision while revealing flashes of dangerous ambition behind hypnotic calm. Yet White never allows Lady Macbeth to remain a villain. As the weight of their crimes begins to crush her spirit, confidence gives way to guilt, certainty dissolves into psychological torment, and the woman who once summoned darkness finds herself consumed by it. Her emotional unraveling is beautifully measured and deeply affecting.

Together, White and Donohue create something equally compelling: a marriage. Their relationship begins as an intimate partnership built upon shared dreams before slowly unraveling under the unbearable weight of guilt. Watching the distance grow between them becomes as heartbreaking as Macbeth’s political downfall itself.

Mike Ryan lends Banquo quiet nobility before returning in one of the production’s most unforgettable images. Bathed in blood, he rises like the physical manifestation of Macbeth’s guilty conscience, haunting the king with terrifying restraint rather than theatrical excess.

The witches, known as The Weird Sisters, are genuinely unsettling figures. Patty Gallagher, Carolyn Ratteray and Renee Torchio MacDonald appear draped in filthy rags, tangled hair and faces marked with stark black stripes that transform them into creatures existing somewhere between human and spirit. All three performers ground the witches in an unnerving stillness that makes every prophecy feel inevitable.

One of the greatest pleasures of Santa Cruz Shakespeare’s repertory company is watching actors disappear into entirely different characters from one production to the next. Audiences who attend “[Much Ado About Nothing](#)” might find themselves doing double takes throughout “Macbeth.”

Patty Gallagher, who delights audiences as the hilariously bumbling Dogberry in “Much Ado,” returns in “Macbeth” transformed into the lead witch of The Weird Sisters. She has an almost alchemical presence, as though she is conjuring forces far older than the world around her. There is nothing cartoonish about her performance. She is mysterious, commanding, and deeply unsettling, making every appearance feel like fate itself has entered the stage.

Nowhere is an actor’s transformation more remarkable than with Allie Pratt. After portraying the sweet, spirited Hero in “Much Ado,” Pratt returns as Malcolm, the exiled prince and rightful heir to Scotland’s throne. The contrast is astonishing. With a commanding physical presence and an almost unrecognizable appearance, Pratt’s range has remarkable depth as she fully inhabits Malcolm, projecting the resolve of a future king preparing to reclaim his country.



From left: Will Block as Ross looks toward Allie Pratt as Malcolm and ML Roberts as MacDuff in “Macbeth” at Santa Cruz Shakespeare. Credit: Photo courtesy of SCS

ML Roberts brings emotional force to Macduff, balancing grief with righteous determination, while Charlotte Boyce Munson gives Lady Macduff genuine warmth that makes her family’s doom all the more devastating. Throughout the rest of the cast, there is not a weak performance to be found.

One aspect of Mullins’ direction deserves particular praise. Shakespeare’s language can intimidate audiences encountering the play for the first time, but not here. This cast speaks the verse with remarkable clarity and emotional honesty. Rather than sounding like performers reciting classical literature, they sound like people wrestling with impossible decisions. That accessibility allows both newcomers and longtime Shakespeare lovers to experience the tragedy on equal footing.

On the design side, B. Modern’s costumes are impressive. Rich leather armor, weathered swords, layered capes, and a palette of earthy browns and deep blues evoke a harsh medieval Scotland without ever feeling like museum pieces. Sharon Riddle’s wigs and makeup complete the illusion, leaving faces smeared with battle grime, hair windblown and worn, and every character looking as though they have truly lived in this unforgiving world.

Michael Schweikardt’s handsome two-level set provides striking architectural lines, while the moving platforms serve as storytelling devices constantly reshaping the world around the characters.

Marcella Barbeau’s lighting and Rodolfo Ortega’s evocative sound design continually deepen the atmosphere. Together they create an immersive theatrical landscape where danger seems to linger in every shadow and every distant drumbeat.

Perched atop an elevated platform, the witches stir their enormous cauldron with towering staffs as thick steam rises into blood-red light. Ghostly apparitions slowly emerge through the haze. It is one of the evening’s unforgettable theatrical tableaux, proving that imagination, lighting and sound can still produce moments every bit as breathtaking as anything created on a movie screen.

Kit Wilder’s fight choreography is thrilling, athletic and wonderfully brutal. Every clash of steel feels dangerous without sacrificing clarity or storytelling. And yes, there is blood. Plenty of it. The violence never feels gratuitous, only unavoidable, reminding us that every act of ambition carries a terrible cost.

Beautifully acted, visually arresting and emotionally devastating, Santa Cruz Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” reminds us why this tragedy has endured for centuries. It is more than the story of a king’s downfall. It is a timeless meditation on power, conscience, and the terrible cost of sacrificing one’s humanity in pursuit of ambition.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare isn’t simply staging great plays this summer. It is producing theater of extraordinary caliber in our own backyard. If “Much Ado About Nothing” and “Macbeth” are any indication, audiences are in for a remarkable season. One can’t wait to see what rises from the grove next.