

It's a Trip! A new look at 'Macbeth' live at NTC Barracks

by Lonnie Burstein Hewitt / *La Jolla Light*

It's a sure thing that you've never seen a production of "Macbeth" like the one opening at NTC on March 6.

Produced by THE TRIP, a two-year-old company founded by Tom Dugdale and Joshua Kahan Brody, graduates of the MFA Directing program at UC San Diego, it's a radical re-visioning of the classic drama, staged in former military barracks.

THE TRIP's last effort was the staging of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" as a backyard barbecue, part of last fall's Without Walls Festival at La Jolla Playhouse. Now they're breaking new ground with a gender-bending, multiple-role-playing, shortened and souped-up version of Shakespeare's original, with a cast of five, including director Dugdale, who plays an added Narrator.

“The Narrator helps navigate our compression of the play; our production will be a taut 70 minutes,” Dugdale explained. “The Narrator also de-sanctifies, or let’s say, brings the play down to Earth. Shakespeare’s plays are mighty; they’re the greatest pieces of dramatic text in our language, but that doesn’t absolve artists from the responsibility of tackling them and wrestling them to the ground. So we’re saying, ‘We love this play, and here are some things we love about it; and here’s a goofy song or two, and a tap-dance; and we’d like to share all this with you.’ ”

Dugdale, who has impressive theater credits here and in New York City, spent last year at La Jolla Playhouse as a recipient of the Princess Grace Award, which honors outstanding young Americans in the performing arts. Besides directing, he’s an opera singer, actor and playwright, and contributed additional text, music and lyrics to THE TRIP’s “Macbeth.” Co-producer Brody is also one of the actors, who are all UCSD Theatre and Dance alumni.

I was part of a small audience invited to an early preview of the show in a rehearsal room at La Jolla Playhouse. It was the fifth day of rehearsal and no one was in costume, but the cast was off-book, and happy to be seen.

“We like to show the work sooner than later, so we don’t get too precious about it,” Dugdale said.

The play starts with the roar of war; sound and fury are major elements in this “Macbeth.” Shakespeare might not recognize much of his tragedy here; there’s more attitude than depth of character, and most of the poetry is deconstructed. There are certainly more laughs than in the original, not to mention cool beats and red balloons. As for the fact that “Macbeth” is played by a woman, and the head witch by a man ... well, Lady Macbeth and the witches were all played by men in Shakespeare’s time, so infidelity to gender is really nothing new.

The truth is, I liked what I saw at the preview, and look forward to seeing the finished piece. It’s not something you’ll want to take the kids to, unless they’re college kids, but it may well be something you’ll want to see for yourself. In rehearsal, “Macbeth” wore a T-shirt that read: “No more boring theater.” THE TRIP’s “Macbeth” isn’t boring at all.