

Macbeth

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Films

MACBETH

To film "Macbeth" is a major undertaking. The play is one of the greatest of Shakespeare's mature tragedies, and is by no means easy to stage successfully, even in the theatre.

From the dark, turbulent material contained in Holinshed's "Chronicle of England and Scotland" (and possible Scott's "Discoverie of Witches"). Shakespeare fashioned a play that vastly transcends its source material, both in height and depth. The instrument by which he wrought this miracle is his verse, and the play contains some of the most compressed and incandescent poetry in the whole of English literature. Modern critics, like Wilson Knight L. C. Knights and Derek Traversi, have convincingly demonstrated the extent of which it is the impact of the poetry, rather than the bare bones of the story or the characters, that gives "Macbeth" its coherence and tremendous power.

That this view of the play is correct has been demonstrated by two previous film versions: Orson Welles' "Macbeth" and Kurosawa's "Throne of Blood". Both films were made by highly gifted directors and contain magnificent sequences. Both, however, missed the poetry of the play, and seemed to present interpretations of Shakespeare's source material rather than versions of the play as Shakespeare conceived and wrote it.

It is the outstanding merit of George Schaefer's new film of "Macbeth" that it puts the emphasis squarely where it belongs, on the poetry. For this purpose he engaged two of the finest Shakespearian actors of our day: the British-born actor, Maurice Evans, who is now America's leading Shakespearian actor, and Judith Anderson, the Australian-born actress, whose outstanding services to the dramatic stage were officially recognised in 1960, when she was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire.

Judith Anderson's Lady Macbeth is a splendidly proud and imperious creation: a woman instantly ready to assume the burden of an irrevocable act of evil, who discovers too late that this is a burden too heavy for her to bear. It is a performance in the grand manner, which almost convinces one that here is a woman who might well have made a magnificent queen under happier circumstances.

Maurice Evans' Macbeth is a more complex figure. For all his mature and handsome virility, this is a Macbeth who never entirely manages to overcome his weakness, the creature of his deed rather than its instigator. Unlike his apparently much stronger wife, he does not crack under the consequences of his acts: "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" becomes his guiding maxim, and at the end of the play, his identification with evil is absolute. And yet this thoughtful, beautifully spoken performance is pervaded to the end by a sad, still music, a ghostly reminder of what Macbeth once was and might have been, what he killed in himself as well as in others. It is a deeply moving performance, which lends a note of human poignancy to the violent ending of the play.

The two principals are supported by a large and talented cast. Michael Hordern makes an outstanding Banquo, and there are fine performances from Ian Bannen (as Macduff), Felix Aylmer, Malcolm Keen and George Rose — to name only a few. The director, George Schaefer, has for many years been an important figure in the American theatre. He ran the famous New York Centre Company for four years, and has directed Maurice Evans in "Macbeth" on the stage as well as on television. His film version is the result of twenty years' intensive concern with the play.

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