

Theme: Shakespeare – Literary Giant [Text: <http://tinyurl.com/2xsa5h>]

Text: *Modern 'Macbeth' spills blood in the kitchen*, Christopher Rawson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 10, 2006

BBC America's "ShakespeaRe-Told" series that started last week continues Sunday with "Macbeth" set in a Scottish restaurant. It proves to be a powerful, entertaining and even amusing choice.

But first, an apology. In reviewing the debut of the series, last week's "Much Ado About Nothing," in which Beatrice and Benedict were transformed into feuding news anchors on a regional British TV channel, I apparently stirred up an appetite I couldn't satisfy. Several readers searched fruitlessly for "ShakespeaRe-Told" on PBS, where they're used to seeing BBC shows, not realizing that BBC America is a distinct cable channel, available mainly to people with digital cable. [...]

Like "Much Ado," "Macbeth" is completely re-written by Peter Moffat in a modern idiom. But his script is ingenuous in finding modern analogies for plot and characters. In some ways, "Macbeth" works even better than "Much Ado." Amid the comedy of the latter, I was constantly noticing the ways the Bard had been purposefully fitted to a more modern taste. But "Macbeth" is a more compact, focused experience already, so once the basic equivalents have been set, the story can drive doggedly forward without the distractions (in this case) of witty translations.

That basic equivalent is the blood of the kitchen, which makes a fitting parallel to the blood of battle. In this highly competitive restaurant, just distinguished with the award of a third Michelin star, the intense kitchen camaraderie is very like that on a battlefield.

Joe Macbeth loves his work and pursues it with passion. His handsome wife, elegant in black leather, manages the personal politics and P.R. at the front of the restaurant as its maitre d', but Macbeth's role is more intense and primal -- perfecting recipes and techniques while bonding with the kitchen staff amid the bloody intensity of the work.

Meanwhile, the restaurant owner, Duncan Docherty (an Irishman -- interesting choice) accepts the plaudits that belong to Joe. He even puts on a blood-spattered chef's smock to accept those plaudits from customers who don't know he no longer busies himself in the kitchen. So Macbeth is willing enough to fall in with his wife's plan to murder Duncan and gain control, since Duncan's son Malcolm is not yet up to speed in the business.

The three witches are amusingly transformed into three sanitation workers ("bin men," the Brits say). It's clear that they can prophesy because they know their world so well, deducing from the debris of people's lives. Their irreverence is tangy. They tell Macbeth he's safe until pigs fly, which sounds like forever, but by the end of the movie the pigs are definitely flying, as police helicopters hover overhead.

There are other clever adaptations like this, as when someone mentions the name of a famous chef, only to be rebuked and told that's bad luck: "just call him 'the Scottish chef,'" he's told, a clear approximation of the backstage superstition of never saying "Macbeth" but referring to it instead as "the Scottish play." And the bin men slip in lots of Shakespearean borrowings -- "sound and fury," "all our yesterdays."

"Macbeth" is aired Sunday at 7 p.m., but you probably don't want to let young children watch, since it's pretty gory. The goriest sequence involves the slicing and dicing not of humans (all that killing takes place off camera) but of the meat they prepare, and especially a large pig's head. (566)

Annotations:

3 *Much Ado About Nothing* –romantic comedy set in Italy **4** feuding – continue to quarrel for a long time
6 PBS – Public Broadcasting Service (USA) **12** doggedly – tenaciously, with determination **15** Michelin star – restaurant rating **18** P.R. – public relations; maitre d' – s.o. who welcomes guests in a restaurant and gives orders to the waiters **19** primal – fundamental, central **21** plaudits – praise **27** deduce ... debris – draw conclusions from what other people throw away **28** irreverence – lack of respect; tangy – sharp, biting **35** gory – full of bloodshed and violence

Assignments:

1. Point out the changes that have been made in the BBC TV productions to modernize Shakespeare's plays. [Context / Orientation]
2. Work closely on the text to explain what details in the production of *Macbeth* are likely to impress the viewers and why. [Analysis]
3. Compare different ways of presenting the witches in *Macbeth* and say which you find best suited to keep Shakespeare's appeal alive in the 21st century. Give reasons in your answer. [Evaluation]