

“Why, then ‘Tis Time to Do It.”

Erica Schmidt’s Unsettling and Uncanny Mac Beth at the Red Bull

Introduction

Erica Schmidt's *Mac Beth* took the 2019 Off-Broadway season by (literal) storm. Nominated for numerous awards, this production left critics reeling and raving over her all-female production of Shakespeare's bloody play. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a particularly male-dominated text; however, this does not inhibit the role of its female characters, and "by replacing the play's male community with an entirely female world, this production highlights and intensifies these figures' shaping power, with fascinating and terrifying consequences."¹

The Witches and Lady Macbeth serve as particularly critical characters when it comes to the driving action and overwhelming theme of fate throughout the play. Opening with three *female* witches in the woods immediately sets the tone for the rest of the play and establishes their sheer importance in the text. Schmidt takes this a step further by adapting the text to be for seven young women, with a focus on the witches' involvement in the action. From the title to the final stage direction, this play is about women. Changing the title from the traditionally masculine *Macbeth* to *Mac Beth* immediately tells the audience that this play is "for the girls." This floods the text with a sense of overwhelming femininity and aligns perfectly with Schmidt's artistic intentions for this adaptation.

"*Macbeth* is a play about the eclipse of civility and manhood, [and] the temporary triumph of evil."² *Mac Beth* is also a play about "the eclipse of civility," but, even more so, it is a play about adolescent women who allow themselves to get too carried away with their fantasy of "playing *Macbeth*." It is a play about what it means to be a young woman, and what it means to

¹ Pollard, Tanya. 2019. "Haunting Women in Macbeth." Red Bull Theater (blog). April 26, 2019. <https://www.redbulltheater.com/post/haunting-women-in-macbeth>.

² Kermode, Frank. 1997. "Macbeth." In *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed., 1355–59. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin (Academic).

be growing up in a society that is overflowing with violence. Author Alex Mar perfectly defines this “transition” for young women:

To be an adolescent girl is, for many, to view yourself as desperately set apart, powerfully misunderstood. A special alien, terrible and extraordinary... It’s an age defined by a raw desire for experience; by the chaotic beginning of a girl’s sexual self; by obsessive friendships, fast emotions, the birth and rebirth of hard grudges, an inner life that stands outside of logic.³

Schmidt explores what may happen if we succumb to our adolescent intrusive and primal thoughts. As a young woman who grew up in the American school system and has gone through adolescence using fantasy as a form of escapism- be that through theatre, literature, or playing “make believe” as a child- I found this production to be horrifically intoxicating and jarring.

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

Shakespeare’s source material for *Macbeth* was Holinshed’s 1577 edition of *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, although he took many creative liberties with his plot.⁴ *Macbeth* is a Jacobean play through and through. Jacobean drama is known for its portrayal of the extremes of the human experience and emotions. Full of blood and political intrigue, Jacobean Drama appealed to all audience types, including the monarchy. *Macbeth* specifically does an excellent job of catering to King James’ sensibilities. Short in length, set in Scotland, featuring his supposed ancestor Banquo, and demonizing witchcraft and other political threats to the crown, *Macbeth* was practically tailor-made for James.

Macbeth is certainly one of Shakespeare’s shorter plays, this is most likely because James famously had a rather short attention span. James was King of Scotland before he was also King

³ Mar, Alex, and Taylor Callery. n.d. “Out Came the Girls.” Vqronline.org. Accessed April 17, 2023. <https://www.vqronline.org/essays-articles/2017/10/out-came-girls>.

⁴ “Holinshed’s Chronicles, 1577.” n.d. British Library. Accessed April 18, 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/holinsheds-chronicles-1577>.

of England, and it was a common knowledge that King James traced his lineage back to Banquo who is featured in *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, the witches claim that Banquo will sire a long line of kings, although he will never be king himself. Finally, witchcraft plays a larger role in *Macbeth* than in any other Shakespeare play.⁵ James was notoriously obsessed with witchcraft, even going so far as to publish *Daemonologie* in 1597.

Anxieties concerning witchcraft had plagued England for centuries prior to James' accession to the throne. It was a commonly held belief that witchcraft was associated with the devil, and therefore stood in opposition to what is "good." Unsurprisingly, sexist ideas about witchcraft dominated the accusations and beliefs about its practices. Sorcery was viewed as something entirely separate from witchcraft and was usually practiced by men, whereas witchcraft was practiced by women and was a "tool of the devil's."⁶ Early Modern beliefs held that it was more within the nature of women to fall prey to the devil, and this idea can be traced back to Eve's role in "The Fall."⁷

Schmidt's Inspiration

The idea of women going into the woods to participate in occult behavior is not new. After all, "girls have always been going into the woods together to play in imagined occults, and a few have come back with real blood on their hands."⁸ In America, we can trace this trend back to the Salem Witch Trials beginning in 1692, later dramatized in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.⁹

⁵ "Witches in Macbeth." n.d. British Library. Accessed April 18, 2023.
<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/witches-in-macbeth>.

⁶ Lewis, Ioan M., and Jeffrey Burton Russell. 2022. "Witchcraft." In Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁷ "Witchcraft." In Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁸ Fox, Akiva. 2019. "The Wild Girls." Red Bull Theater (blog). April 26, 2019.
<https://www.redbulltheater.com/post/wild-girls-akiva-fox>.

⁹ It is important to note that the young women accused of witchcraft in *The Crucible* are not in fact guilty, the play is meant to serve as a commentary on mass hysteria and the communist "witch trials" of the 1950s. Additionally, The

Inspired by stories of young women heading into the woods with occult intentions throughout history, and by current events, Schmidt’s adaptation is particularly poignant for a contemporary audience. Schmidt cites multiple recent events as her primary inspiration for the concept. The first is the horrific murder of Skylar Neese in 2012. The sixteen-year-old was brought into the woods one night by two of her friends, where they stabbed her to death with kitchen knives.¹⁰ Later, one of the girls would post this tweet referencing the attack on Skylar:



Schmidt copy-and-pastes this line into her adaptation to be used in the chilling conclusion. In 2014 a girl would be stabbed by two of her friends nineteen times in the woods as a “blood sacrifice” to the urban legend, Slender Man.¹¹ Both stories made national news due to their horrific and absurd nature, as young girls are not usually the primary suspects for such violent cases. In the case of the Slender Man stabbing, one of the girls was later diagnosed with something called “shared delusional belief.” Shared delusional belief is defined as: “a rare disorder characterized by sharing a delusion among two or more people in a close relationship. The inducer (primary) who has a psychotic disorder with delusions influences another

Crucible is explicitly misogynistic in the way that it portrays and defines witchcraft, like how witchcraft is presented in Jacobean drama.

¹⁰ DeLong, William. 2021. “16-Year-Old Skylar Neese Was Stabbed to Death by Her Two Best Friends Because They Didn’t like Her Anymore.” All That’s Interesting. November 2, 2021. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/skylar-neese-murder>.

¹¹ Fox, Akiva. “The Wild Girls.”

nonpsychotic individual or more (induced, secondary) based on a delusional belief,”¹² which is something Schmidt is interested in exploring in *Mac Beth*.

Equally, it is just as important to address Schmidt’s exploration of violence between adolescent girls. Many cult classic films such as *Heathers* or *Mean Girls* highlight the cattier side of high school female relationships; however, they take on a far more satirical tone than *Mac Beth* does. As entertaining as “you can’t sit with us” may be, these films fail to grasp the harsh reality behind these tropes. Female-female violence and bullying are very real problems in the American school system. It is rarer to see young girls throw punches, compared to young boys, but there is more than one way to fight. Young girls learn how to fight with their words instead of their fists because that is what is socially expected of them. Words are equally as dangerous as physical violence, if not more; but in the woods, gender norms don’t apply. *Mac Beth* shows us a group of young girls who are free to express themselves however they see fit; for some that’s embodying male characters, and for others, that involves giving into primal and violent urges.

The Adaptation

Right off the bat, Schmidt makes a controversial choice with the opening line. She begins with “where hast thou been, Sister?” from act I, scene iii instead of the iconic line: “when shall we three meet again;” however, her reasoning for this becomes much clearer by the end. Schmidt left most of the original text intact, apart from a few modern interjections added, for example in act four when the witches are brewing the potion:

Witch 3 holds up a glass slide with a fetus pressed in it.

WITCH 1. Where did you get that?

WITCH 3. The science lab.¹³

¹² Al Saif, Feras, and Yasir Al Khalili. 2022. Shared Psychotic Disorder. StatPearls Publishing.

¹³ Schmidt, Erica, and Shakespeare, William. 2020. “Mac Beth,” 42. New York: Dramatists Play Service.

It's an unsettling image to be sure, but Schmidt excels at establishing tone and narrative through stage directions. There are two instances in which this is most exciting. The first is in act four when the witches begin their prophecy:

Thunder. The witches scream and run around the cauldron. Macduff, Lady M, and Banquo enter and join the witches running wildly around the cauldron. They each have baby dolls hidden. Macduff's doll has a removable head, Lady M's doll is covered in blood, and Banquo's doll is carrying a small bundle of sticks and is wearing a crown. Macduff comes forward as if possessed- holding her doll out toward Macbeth.

"First Apparition an armed head."'¹⁴

The sequence continues with Macduff, Lady Macbeth, and Banquo all coming forward and playing their part in the apparitions. Macduff's significance in the first apparition is relatively straight forward; at the end of the traditional play, Macduff will decapitate Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth's baby doll represents the "none of woman born" part of the prophecy, but there's an interesting added layer that comes with having the actor playing Lady Macbeth execute this aspect of the prophecy. The debate over Lady Macbeth's motherhood is especially prominent in criticism surrounding *Macbeth*. A popular theory is that Lady Macbeth has lost one or more children prior to the action of the play. In act I, scene vii, Lady Macbeth says: "I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me," implying that she has breast-fed a child at some point.¹⁵ Kristen Page-Kirby argues that a potential motivation for the Macbeths is not ambition, but rather grief for this supposed lost child.¹⁶ Whether this interpretation is correct or not, it makes the image of the actor playing Lady Macbeth carrying a bloody baby that was "taken away too soon" particularly powerful. In the context of *Mac Beth*,

¹⁴ Schmidt, "Mac Beth," 43.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, William. "Macbeth," Act I, scene vii, 54-55.

¹⁶ Page-Kirby, Kristen. 2015. "'Macbeth' Gave Me a New Way of Thinking about an Old Text." Washington Post (Washington, D.C.: 1974), December 11, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2015/12/11/its-grief-that-powers-this-macbeth/>.

this is even more interesting since these are adolescent girls experiencing raging hormones. Tampons are a reoccurring motif throughout the play, used by both the witches and Lady Macbeth.

Finally, Banquo's "baby" represents Malcom, the rightful ruler of Scotland, who will carry Birnam wood to Dunsinane. It is also interesting to note that Banquo's role in carrying the crowned child is significant because, according to the witches' prophecy, his son Fleance will take the throne next. The vivid stage directions continue:

*"A show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand; Banquo following." The girls toss the crown they hold it to their heads to represent themselves as King. Banquo first and last of the eight kings. As they toss the crown they run about- they are solemn, merciless, laughing spirited.
Banquo has the crown.¹⁷*

Early Modern plays are known for having minimal stage directions printed; therefore, by including so many stage directions to help bring her modern concept to life, Schmidt has made this play something entirely modern and unique.

Perhaps the most significant detour from the original text is Schmidt's "grand finale." It is smooth sailing until the battle between Macbeth and Macduff, and then Schmidt's true narrative takes over. Macduff grabs the crown as expected and then:

WITCH 1. One.
WITCH 2. Two.
WITCH 3. Three.
WITCH 1. Why then 'tis time to do it.
The witches jump on Macbeth and begin to stab her with the kitchen knives. This is "real" and should be truly horrifying. Use stage blood. Lots of it....
WITCH 1. Out, out brief candle.¹⁸

¹⁷ Schmidt, "Mac Beth," 45.

¹⁸ Schmidt, "Mac Beth," 59.

Banquo, Lady M, and Macduff are horrified and run away. The witches then go on to decapitate the girl playing Macbeth and take selfies with her head. Then, they clean up and leave as if nothing happened. The violence in this scene stands in stark contrast to the specific note Schmidt prefaces the play with: “the fighting is intense and full-on. No stage blood or weapons are used, but the girls hurl themselves at each other and revel/excel in committing pretend murder.”¹⁹

“Why then ‘tis time to do it” is a nod to Lady Macbeth’s line in act V, scene I, and “Out, out brief candle” is a reference to Macbeth’s famous soliloquy in act V, scene v. This horrifying ending truly encapsulates the danger of collective fantasy blended with the narrative of “we are in America- where school violence is so common as to be horrifyingly banal.”²⁰

Finally, Schmidt concludes the play with an incredibly memorable choice. She goes back to the very beginning of Shakespeare’s text:

WITCH 1. When shall we three meet again?
WITCH 2. In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
WITCH 3. When the hurlyburly’s done-
The girls start to exit-
WITCH 1. We really did go on three-
They laugh as they go.
End of Play²¹

Perhaps the most startling aspect of this choice is how nonchalant the girls are about the murder they have just committed, or how it was premeditated. Or maybe it’s how Schmidt intentionally goes back to the beginning to imply a potential cyclical pattern of violence and how this all may repeat itself again, as does the trend of violence in American schools. Regardless,

¹⁹ Schmidt, “Mac Beth,” 5.

²⁰ Schmidt, “Mac Beth,” 5.

²¹ Schmidt, “Mac Beth,” 60.

concluding with the haunting words of Shelia Eddy following the real murder of her friend, is truly bone-chilling.

The Red Bull and the Production

Red Bull Theatre was founded in 2003 in New York City with a commitment to producing work that “unites a respect for tradition with a modern sensibility.”²² They believe in the relevance and power of classical theatre, and the importance of continuing its tradition. Additionally, they are also proponents of the development of New Works. They specialize in New Work that compliments yet challenges classical texts. The Red Bull has upheld their commitment to produce many forgotten plays of the Jacobean period, but also progressive and relevant interpretations of some of the more popular plays, like *Mac Beth*. *Mac Beth* was first staged by the Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2018. It was later picked up by the Red Bull in 2019 and received a nomination for the Lucille Lortel Award for Best Revival, and Drama Desk Award nominations for best Direction, Scenic Design, and Revival of a Play.

Scenic Design

Conceived by Catherine Cornell, the scenic design of this production was excellently atmospheric. Performed in a thrust space, the stage was covered in grass and other features to create an abandoned field/junk yard. Perhaps the most impressive feature was the onstage rainstorm. Storms traditionally play a significant role in *Macbeth*, it’s integral when it comes to establishing the spooky tone and setting. Additionally, the use of the puddle during Lady Macbeth’s handwashing monologue and the climactic finale was gut-wrenchingly excellent.

²² “About.” n.d. Red Bull Theater. Accessed April 17, 2023. <https://www.redbulltheater.com/about>.

Cornell's design was equally aesthetic and realistic. It was a completely immersive and lived-in space which lent itself nicely to the all-consuming fantasy of the play.

Lighting and Sound Design

The lighting by Jeff Croiter and sound by Erin Bednarz worked together perfectly to create an immersive atmosphere of void-like desolation. The lighting subtly enhanced the gloomy atmosphere, and evolved so subtly throughout the production that by the time the finale came around, the storm had made the stage as dark as the action occurring onstage.

There were many organic sound effects, like the falling on rain onstage and the squish of walking on wet turf, as well as the splash of the puddle. All denoted "knocking" cues in the script, as well as other sounds to establish a sense of impending doom and danger were accomplished by the banging of pipes on various set pieces. Bednarz added another layer of ambiance by creating a soundscape of sounds one might expect to hear in the middle of a desolate field, including gusts of wind and barking dogs. The coronation scene was accompanied by a rave-like dance party to Beyoncé's "Bow Down." This song was an excellent choice for both textual and conceptual reasons. On a concept level, it's a contemporary pop song and artist that teenage girls frequently listen to, and it's a celebratory song about bowing down to the queen.

The chorus goes as follows:

Bow down bitches, bow bow down bitches
Bow down bitches, bow bow down bitches
H-Town vicious, H-H-Town vicious
I'm so crown, bow bow down bitches²³

There's an interesting line at the beginning of the song about little girls dreaming of being in Beyoncé's world, or being Queens:

²³ Beyoncé. 2013. Bow Down. Parkwood; Columbia.

I know when you were little girls
You dreamt of being in my world
Don't forget it, don't forget it
Respect that, bow down bitches²⁴

That line is particularly interesting in the context of this play being about young women playing pretend. On a deeper level textually, the song is a celebration of female power, and about being a queen. Another interesting layer with this song relates to Lady Macbeth and the power that she possesses in this play, not just as a Queen, but as Macbeth's wife.

I took some time to live my life
But don't think I'm just his little wife
Don't get it twisted, get it twisted
This my shit, bow down bitches²⁵

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth certainly does not abide by traditional gender norms. She is a powerful woman who is willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wants. She is not controlled by her husband, rather she possesses a significant amount of power over him.

Costume Design

Jessica Pabst's costume design pays brilliant homage to the traditional setting of *Macbeth* by dressing the actors in private school tartan uniforms. The costumes take advantage of layers and various pieces of the uniforms that the girls utilize to denote different characters, as well as character journeys throughout the play. By having the actors play around with removing and adding layers for different characters adds to the idea that this is a group of young girls playing "make believe."

An interesting layer that comes with school uniform costumes is the idea of individuality versus uniformity. Young women live in a society where there are clear social and gender norms that they must adhere to. At private schools, uniforms limit the students' ability to express

²⁴ Beyoncé. 2013. Bow Down.

²⁵ Beyoncé. 2013. Bow Down.

themselves. Self-expression is a critical part of the adolescent period when it comes to development. These girls are following a strict dress code, and probably other copious sets or rules in their daily lives, so they have turned to their *Macbeth* Club to find the freedom of expression that teenagers crave. Escapism and collective fantasy are powerful tools that these girls are allowing themselves to get too carried away with, to the extent that it becomes dangerous.

Reception and Significance

As with most Shakespeare productions, critics had strong feelings about this production. Some raved that they had “never seen a more exciting or clearer version... of *Macbeth*.”²⁶ Others went so far as to quote *Macbeth* by claiming “this is a sorry sight,” and “Erica Schmidt’s trainwreck of a production is an insult to both Shakespeare and teenage girls.”²⁷ Some audience members complained about rain or fake blood ending up on their clothes, while others about the lack of specificity concerning the girls’ motivations and backstories: “I kept wondering who these girls were and what the tensions were among the group,” says critic David Cote.²⁸ The only specificity about the identity of the girls appears on page 45 when *Macbeth* says:

Rebellious dead, rise never, till the wood
Of Birnam rise; (and our high-plac’d Beth
Shall live the lease of Nature, pay his breath
To time, and mortal custom.)²⁹

²⁶ Herman, Donna. 2019. “Review of Red Bull Theater’s *Mac Beth* at Lucille Lortel Theatre.” *New York Theatre Guide*. May 20, 2019. <https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/review-of-red-bull-theaters-mac-beth-at-lucille-lortel-theatre>.

²⁷ Geier, Thom. 2019. “‘*Mac Beth*’ Theater Review: High School Girls Reenact the Bard with Much Sound but No Fury.” *TheWrap* (blog). May 19, 2019. <https://www.thewrap.com/mac-beth-theater-review-isabelle-fuhrman-annsophia-robb-macbeth-shakespeare/>.

²⁸ Cote, David. 2019. “‘*Mac Beth*’ Is Shakespeare Made over by Private School Girls.” *Observer*, May 20, 2019. <https://observer.com/2019/05/mac-beth-erica-schmidt-red-bull-shakespeare-made-over-by-private-school-girls-review/>.

²⁹ Schmidt, “*Mac Beth*,” 45.

This is of note because the original text reads: “our high plac’d Macbeth.”³⁰ By shortening “Macbeth” to “Beth,” we can infer that the name of the girl playing Macbeth is Beth. By keeping personal details to a minimum, Schmidt maintains a feeling of ambiguousness as to who these girls might be, which adds to the universality of the problem of female violence in American schools. Regardless of how “traditional” of a production this was, Schmidt accomplished exactly what she set out to do. She saw a gap in the text:

A cruelty with no reflection in Shakespeare: The cruelty of teenage girls. This is not said lightly... Yet, violence in Shakespeare is a masculine endeavor. To take just one famous example, Lady Macbeth wishes to be “unsexed,” as if the playwright did not believe that the feminine could perform murderous acts. Yet they can; they have. Transposing Macbeth into Mac Beth comments on both.³¹

Schmidt takes full advantage of this gap, because if there was ever a time to talk about female violence in American schools, “why, then ‘tis time to do it.”

³⁰ Shakespeare, William. “Macbeth,” Act IV, scene i, 98.

³¹ Tingley, Michael. 2020. “Mac Beth: Deep in a Dark, Dark Forest.” Theater Pizzazz. January 18, 2020. <https://www.theaterpizzazz.com/mac-beth-deep-in-a-dark-dark-forest/>.

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